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Sebastian Painadath

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Hindu Impressions on Catholics

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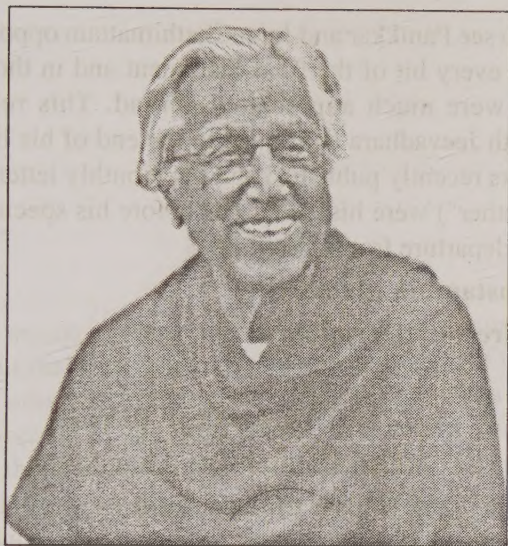
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CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	341
<i>Hindus looking at Catholics:</i>	
The Catholic Institutions should nurture Sound Moral Values in the Young Generation	343
<i>Brinda A. Nair</i>	
Catholics need to be Liberated from Elitism and Exclusive Claims	348
<i>Ramachandran Attur</i>	
Catholics need to be freed from Conversion Mania	354
<i>Govind Bharathan</i>	
Catholics should not use their Services as Baits for Conversion	358
<i>R. K. Bharathan</i>	
Catholic Institutions must promote Value-based Education	361
<i>N. R. Menon</i>	
Catholics should foster Dialogue-initiatives without Bias and Prejudice	364
<i>Ulloor M. Parameswaran</i>	
Catholic Schools must promote the Study of Religions	367
<i>Meha Mathur</i>	
Catholics are to take more Interest in knowing other Religions	369
<i>Meenakshi Khanna</i>	
Are We Co-Pilgrims? A Live-together Experience	374
<i>A Cross-religious reading of the Holy Scriptures:</i>	
A Hindu reading the Sermon on the Mount	377
<i>Ramachandran Attur</i>	
A Christian reading the Bhagavat Gita	388
<i>S. Painadath</i>	
Documentation	399
The Invitation Letter	403
<i>Current Issues:</i>	
India Today: A Study of its Socio-economic, Political and Religious Situation	404
<i>Jose Thayil</i>	
Book Review	417
<i>S P Johnson</i>	



RAIMON PANIKKAR

This issue of Jeevadhara is dedicated to the loving memory of Raimon Panikkar, the prophetic author of *Cosmotheandric Vision of Reality*, *Intra-Religious Dialogue* and *Invisible Harmony*, who died on August 26, 2010 at the age of 91. He was one of the greatest thinkers and writers, if not the greatest, of the twentieth century. The number of Books he wrote comes around 50 and the scholarly articles over 900. His immense scholarship was recognised by the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation by holding a Symposium for discussion of his views. He taught at Harvard Divinity School from 1966 and at the University of California, Santa Barbara from 1972. For many years he taught during the spring in USA and spent the rest of the year in India. Panikkar was a Prophet and had sometimes seemingly mystical insights. Once he spent six months in complete silence and prayer.

His connection with Jeevadhara started during his stay in India. It was in 1976 that Indian Theological Association (ITA) was founded. From That year onwards it has been organizing Seminars annually on an all-India basis. Panikkar actively participated in the Seminars, especially in its final discussions on the Statement of ITA. It was most

interesting to see Panikkar and John Chethimattam oppose and defend respectively every bit of the final Statement and in those years ITA Statements were much appreciated abroad. This relationship of Panikkar with Jeevadhara continued to the end of his life. Copies of his two books recently published and his monthly letters (addressing me "My Brother") were his gifts to us before his special preparation for his final departure from this world..

Joseph Constantine Manalel

Founder-Director, Jeevadhara

Two Theological Terms which Raimon Panikkar loved

Jesus is the Christ (This is Christian Faith).

But the Christ is not only Jesus (The Christ is the universal soteriological presence of the Divine)

Jesus is totus Deus (fully divine)

But not totum Dei (not the totality of the Divine)

The divine self-manifestation is not fully exhausted by the revelation in Jesus

The Infinite cannot be exhausted by the finite

All this does not mean theological relativism

Rather we interpret our faith in Christ *in relation* to other religions

In his latest book *Christophany* he makes it clear that the Christ is the universal, all-immanent, all-embracing, all-transforming reality of the divine presence. The divine Spirit manifested in Jesus Christ transforms the entire humanity into the divine life: thus the Christ shines through all. This is Christophany.

S. Painadath S.J.

Editorial

Dialogue means talking to the other, but also listening to the other. Inter-religious dialogue demands that one takes note of the feelings of the *religious other*. True dialogue is possible only when one is willing to look at oneself as the other looks at oneself. "When we open ourselves to the other, we open ourselves to God" (John Paul II).

In this issue of *Jeevadhara* Catholics try to listen to what the Hindus have to say about the Catholics. A cross section of Hindu friends has been asked to share frankly their impressions on Catholics. What is offered here is not the result of any scientific data collection, but genuine impressions growing out of lived contacts with Catholics, experienced mostly in the school days and in neighbourly relationships. On the whole the Hindu community is grateful to Catholics for their educational services on sound ethical grounds and social commitment reaching out to the poor. On three things our Hindu friends have fears about Catholics:

- i. the theological exclusivism: the claim to possess the only way to salvation
- ii. the cultural elitism: the pretension to be the masters of a superior culture.
- iii. the religious expansionism: the drive for conversion.

Catholics in the multi-religious and secular India need to take note of these apprehensions seriously. An apologetic and defensive response is not helpful for either side. An honest and self-critical introspection into the life and thought of the Catholic Church is the challenge that the divine Spirit throws on the Church through the words of the religious *other*. Authentic divine revelations – in any religion – have to be communicated to others. Genuine religious experiences have to be shared with others. In doing this Catholics must be guided by the words

of Jesus their divine Master: "You know that those who call themselves rulers lord their authority over the others; but among you this should not happen!" (Mk. 10, 42). *Washing each other's feet* is the language that Jesus gave to the Church (Jn. 13, 14). It is time that the Church asks herself: can we any more use terms like *evangelisation*, *proclamation*, *mission* etc. in India today? These are loaded terms which inevitably generate fear in *others*. Jesus' language of *sharing the message of love* in a credible and humble way is the language that the Church has to develop.

Two attempts have been made in this journal to read a Holy Book beyond the boundary of one's religion. In fact the great Scriptures of humanity belong to the common spiritual patrimony of the entire humanity. A cross-religious reading of Scriptures can bring out certain dimensions of the message of the Scripture, which perhaps the traditional interpretation does not unfold. This seems to be an authentic form of inter-religious dialogue.

Several Hindu friends spoke well of the atmosphere of religious harmony that they enjoyed in the sixties in the Catholic schools. They sadly notice that certain fundamentalist trends now creep into the Church. This is an amazing observation. In fact, after the sixties the Catholic Church in the wake of the second Vatican Council promotes world-wide a culture of inter-religious harmony. The documentation with certain significant statements on this could be taken as an evidence for this new era advocated by the Church.

Raimon Panikkar has been a courageous pioneer in opening the Catholic theological doors to other religions. May his life and thought be an inspiration for the future existence of the Catholic Church in India.

Jose Thayil in his article gives an overview of the present Indian scenario, highlighting its socio-economic, political and religious aspects. He deals with six important aspects of Indian society which the biblical exegetes should keep in mind for an Indian reading of the Bible: poverty, casteism, unemployment, migration, religious fundamentalism and terrorism, and politics.

Sebastian Painadath

Sameeksha, Kalady

The Catholic Institutions should nurture Sound Moral Values in the Young Generation

Brinda A. Nair

Brinda A. Nair, teacher at Loyola Jesuit School, Trivandrum, recalls her fond memories of studying and working at various Catholic educational institutions. She found in the Sisters and priests working in them wonderful role-models as well as efficient administrators and strict disciplinarians. They help children grow into maturity on sound moral foundations with a sense of responsibility to society and the country. Brinda does not find Catholic Sisters and priests provoking religious fundamentalism, rather they promote inter-religious understanding and harmony. She however feels that they should be more sensitive to the needs and struggles of the co-workers having a family to take care of.

My association with Catholics probably began when I reached the school going age. My father was an officer in the Indian Air Force and, as a result, we moved from one place to another very often, sometimes even twice in a year. The first school that I attended was a Catholic institution in Shillong, I don't have very vivid memories of that period though. Within a few months we moved to Bangalore, where I was admitted to St. Charles High School, another Catholic institution. After a couple of years we moved to Delhi, where again I

had the opportunity of studying in two good schools: Holy Child School, Ghaziabad, and St. Anthony's Higher Secondary School, Safdarjung Development Area. I passed out of the latter institution with very good results. My parents always secured admission for me in convent schools and as a young girl I neither questioned it nor understood why. Now as I look back on my school days and see what I am today, I feel that they had indeed made the right decision about the choice of schools.

Why did they choose convent schools for me? Take a look at the Sunday edition of any popular newspaper. You will find that most matrimonial advertisements looking for 'brides' ask for 'convent educated' young girls. Why is this preference for convent education? Does convent education improve the market value of prospective brides? Is it because most girls educated under the watchful eyes of the nuns at the convent are chaste, responsible, honest, reliable and loving? Or is it because they can be trusted and relied upon to help the girls lead a moral life remaining devoted and faithful to their husbands and also be loving mothers to their children?

Well, the answer to the above questions is quite simple. Convent schools have always been known for their high moral standards, cleanliness, orderliness, thoroughness, perfectionism and discipline. Most students, who get the benefit of studying in such institutions, grow into young women with sound moral foundations. I too have imbibed qualities which stand me in good stead even in today's materialistic world, and I owe it to a great degree to my education in Catholic schools.

Frankly speaking, as a student, I used to be an ardent admirer of the nuns in my school especially in the most impressionable years of my teenage. I used to wonder at the simplicity of their lives and their dedication to their profession. I admired them for the devotion with which they undertook the nurturing of so many young girls/boys. I admired them for the sacrifices that they had made and things they had renounced. There was even a time when I considered becoming a nun myself and joining them in their work. I had an opportunity to get a sneak peek into their lives as two of my class mates in my higher secondary school were aspirants. I used to question them about their lives and the more I heard about it, the more I was impressed. Their

lives captivated me and it took some counseling and much persuasion to make me give up that desire. While in school, I had many Catholic friends and I used to visit the school chapel every morning and imitate whatever they did. I learnt to kneel and pray, sing hymns and read the day's reading from the Holy Bible. I was drawn to Christ just as I was drawn to my own Hindu gods and goddesses.

On completing my education, I became a teacher and got the opportunity of working with the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary at Sacred Heart High School, Amritsar and the Salesian Sisters of Holy Child at Auxilium School, New Delhi. At present I am working with the Jesuit priests of Loyola School, Trivandrum. I have had great pleasure in working with these dedicated souls for over two decades and I am happy that I could be a part of the great and noble work that they are doing. They are not only wonderful role-models but also efficient administrators and strict disciplinarians. Both teachers as well as students would find it worthwhile to emulate them. They manage people of different kinds of character, temperament and virtues and make them work in unison for a greater cause. They help us find our role in God's plan for us. I too have carved a niche for myself and lead a life of contentment and satisfaction, thanks to the guidance I have received and continue to receive from them.

The contribution of Catholic institutions to society in India is immeasurable. All those who have passed through those portals have been able to lead upright and honest lives, with of course the exception of a few whom none can change. They are driven by a sense of responsibility to the society and the country. They are people with substance and character—qualities that are gradually losing their importance in this fast-paced, corrupt and materialistic world. It is time that people realize that a value-based life style is what the world needs today!

If I am able to tolerate all religions, accept varied views on the Divine, take the good from every religion and be yet a practicing Hindu in spite of everything, it is because of my upbringing at home and my education in Catholic institutions. It has made me broad-minded enough to accept these differences. My teachers and Sisters at school taught me to love God, to pray to Him daily, to thank Him for small mercies,

to ask for forgiveness for my sins and above all to be a loving and caring human being. Even today, when I go to a temple, my prayers are always simple prayers in English. I hardly recite *shlokas* or sing *bhajans*. Hymns come more naturally to me. God, for me is that Supreme Being who is a loving Father willing to listen to me in times of need, willing to help me if I ask for it. He is a constant guide and companion. I am able to go to a temple or a church with the same feeling of devotion because I see all divine representations indeed as one.

Of late Catholic Sisters and priests as well as Catholic institutions have been targeted by fundamentalist groups, who feel that Hindus are being forcibly converted to Christianity by offering baits of free education, jobs, better living conditions and above all a caste-less existence. Many Hindus have fallen for the bait too. But what I feel is that the choice of what religion to profess is one's own. One's relationship with God cannot be decided by others. If people have moved to other religions, it is their choice. I would not like to comment on it. All I can hope is that they get what they are looking for from their new life and their new religion. Let it be worthwhile for them who made the shift.

As far as the expectations of the Hindus go, about the life and service of Catholics, I think they would want them to continue to establish and run educational institutions thereby moulding the young generation to be good citizens of the future. There are people who feel that Catholic priests should be allowed to marry so that they too can enjoy the pleasures of married life and this would help them to better appreciate the dedication of married people employed by them in their institutions. When one gives up the pleasures of the flesh and other natural joys, and focuses on the achievement of one's spiritual goal, it is easier to achieve it than to live in the world as a son/daughter, husband/wife, father/mother and also be able to give one's best to one's work. There is a saying that, you cannot give up what was not yours in the first place. It is for this reason that in the Hindu code of living a man's life has four stages: *Brahmacharya*, *Grihasta*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. One has to go through all four stages to live a life of fulfillment. *Moksha* or Salvation, the aim of everyone's life, is achieved

by those who go through life experiencing all the four stages. Quite often, the priests and Sisters who run most of the catholic institutions fail to understand the problems of people involved in family life. Very few care to understand and empathize.

My views in this article are a result of my first-hand experience with Catholics. I have enjoyed a very good rapport with managements in various schools that I have worked in. My Catholic friends have also been extremely kind, considerate and helpful. From what I know about Catholics, I don't think that they provoke religious fundamentalism. Most Catholic schools celebrate all the important festivals like Diwali, Id and Christmas with the same fervor and enthusiasm as people of those religions do. In Kerala, Muslim students go for Friday prayers from the school and the school exempts them from classes during that time. So I see no threat from that quarter. I only hope and pray that people of all religions learn to tolerate and accept one another as they are and that they work together in harmony for the good of the country. May India's unity in diversity be its strength for its long-term progress and let not narrow-minded and opportunistic politicians use religion as a weapon to divide us.

Loyola School

Trivandrum - 17

Catholics need to be Liberated from Elitism and Exclusive Claims

Ramachandran Attur

Sri. Ramachandran Attur, a retired government officer, speaks of a suspicion in the minds of Hindus over the Catholic social and educational initiatives. This is caused by the Christian elitism and exclusiveness accompanied by a proselytizing mania. He notes that the Church suffers from the psyche of the self-conscious foreigner manifested in the make-believe methods of striking roots in this land. But the Christians do not seem to grasp that the spiritual soil of India has been shaped by the power to look at reality in its divine totality and human complexity. He mentions a few very challenging steps to make the Christian presence in India relevant.

In speaking of the Catholic Church – hereafter referred to as the Church, - I include within my purview not only the Churches that are administered from the Vatican, but also the Societies and sects that owe allegiance to the Pope though maintaining separate identities and autonomy of administration.

Our focus here is primarily on what changes would benefit the Church, because the dominant concern of any mature individual or organization is – and should be - with growth and improvement and not with the defense of the status quo or with rationalizing beliefs or

attitudes that induce complacency. Understandably therefore, the tone of this essay is critical – but it is *constructively* critical.

I have had occasion to work closely with a few members of the Church, and I have been acquainted with a number of priests and nuns. These associations have been a source of immense gratification to me due to the great urbanity and dignity that they brought to bear upon our interaction, their palpable anxiety to be seen as transcending those motives, based on a shallow understanding of Jesus' words, that has over the centuries sullied the name of the Church in the eyes of all serious-minded people, and the total openness of mind with which they entered into fruitful discussion with me regarding both Christianity and Hinduism. Still more importantly, I cherish the exchanges I have had with them in (on my side) a spirit of agnosticism bordering upon atheism, and of the uncompromising investigation and exploration which have been essential to my life's search. Needless to say, my grateful recollections of these interactions make it easy and natural for me to maintain a constructive spirit in these passages.

It is a commonplace to refer to the immense contributions that the Church has made in India in the areas of education, health care as well as poverty and disaster relief. We may also make mention only in passing of the admirable spirit of openness to criticism that informs the letter through which the Editor of Jeevadhara has invited this and other similar contributions.

I would therefore go on to ask: Why is it that even in ordinary people with no active prejudice against the Church or against Christianity, – in fact, even among those who have great veneration for Jesus Christ, – there is a lurking doubt about the purity of intention behind the work done by the Church? Why is there a prevalent feeling that all good work has a proselytizing agenda behind it? Why does such an impression persist in spite of statistics which demonstrate the minimal reach of missionary work under the aegis of the Church and the negligible demographic impact it has had in the last five or six decades? It is the part of wisdom to actively welcome and entertain these questions, and to consider the possibility that there should be an answer for it that calls for action on the part of the Church.

In doing so, we must note that the attitude deep within the heart, in whatever manner it may be packaged, always shows itself in the action,

and that therefore, there can be no pure action – action for God, action in God – until the heart has been purified, and that there is not one man or woman, be he or she ever so poor or ignorant or sick, to whose eyes impure action – action rooted in the ego-self - can be presented as action for God. (Please read the episode of the old woman cleaning up for Sabbath in Leo Tolstoy's story, *The Godson*). That action becomes pure only when it has become entirely free of the ego-self – this indeed is the message of the Bhagavad Gita. Such a purity is not just a matter of freedom from the concerns of a human being's material welfare.

Wherein lies the impurity of the spirit behind Christian action? One must firstly mention the attitude of elitism – i.e. superiority over other religions - and the dogma of exclusiveness - i.e. acceptance by God being possible only through Jesus Christ - which are often openly manifested. We have no case against a belief in the worth and value of one's own religion which every human being has a right to. But elitism and exclusiveness are a different matter: they are offensive and they drain goodwill to an extent that no good done to man can compensate for them. We must note and remember that though a hungry man may accept food which he needs, and a parent who does not have money to educate a daughter may thankfully accept free education, and a poor sick woman will accept free treatment, still these will not make the beneficiaries *love* the giver who is seen as acting from the centre of *his* ego embodied in *his* religion, in *his* God and in his obligations to *his* God as laid down in *his* Scripture. *Truly, such a work blesses neither the one that doth nor the one for whom it is done.*

Partly, the notions of superiority and exclusiveness are attributable to the early indoctrination, and the ingrained belief of the Judaic-Christian tradition that certain things alone are true and that others are heretical. This rules out all meaningful dialogue with the Indian religions and is in sharp contrast to the Indian thinking that all concepts, all beliefs, – even mutually contradictory ones – can be part of the great and complex Reality of our existence. It is advisable not to interpret this Hindu (or rather Indian) view as mere lazy ambivalence or lack of clarity in thinking. The most advanced modern thinking supports the

view that there are many aspects to Truth and Reality so that hardly anything can be declared to be totally wrong (cfr. Edward de Bono's *I am Right, You are Wrong*).

In another part, the belief in superiority and exclusiveness is the result of the need to compensate for the sacrifice of a normal worldly life which in the Church, is considered essential to life in the service of God. Higher wisdom lies clearly in the Hindu notion of the four *ashramas* to be passed through in succession in the human life. (Of course, it is another matter that most Hindus fail to transcend the second *ashrama* and ultimately die on the roadside at that milestone! Nor is it to be argued that a higher state nearer to God is attained in the many denominations of Christianity outside the Church which allow an ordinary householder's life to their priestly functionaries.) Entirely true too is the Hindu belief that the householder's life is in nowise incompatible with aspiration towards God. And it can even be argued that it is only by passing in sequence through the different stages that truly sustainable progress can be achieved. However, these affirmations are not to the purpose in the extant situation, in which what is to be noted is that the highest benefits of austerity, possessionlessness, chastity and penance can be attained only when aspiration for any reward – even the reward of the gratification of acting for God – has been given up; and when action has not only become desireless (*nishkamakarma*), but purified of the sense of agency (*naishkarmya*). Then indeed all action, whether charitable, educational, medical or evangelical, is seen to be selfless. And then the (apparent) agent of action will be truly loved – not for the sake of the material benefit that comes of his action, but for the manifestation of the Divine that appears through him as the light of the sun appears through a chink in the wall to the prisoner's eye.

Of all elitism and exclusiveness, the most offensive are certain demonstrations such as the attempt to depict Jesus Christ as the light of Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights, during the Pope's visit to India in 1999; and the attempts by evangelists with little knowledge of Hinduism, still less of Christianity, and negligible spirituality, to denigrate Hinduism for the glory of Jesus.

In India, Christianity like Islam suffers from the psyche of the self-conscious foreigner. This manifests itself in the need to maintain a

separate identity, which involves a constant struggle against the integrative spirit of this land. It also manifests itself in a demonstrative sense of superiority, but what is actually involved is neither superiority nor inferiority, but a struggle on the part of Christianity to find its place, its relevance, its appropriate message in consonance with the peculiar genius of this land. A genuine relevance for Christianity in India and an appropriate message of Christianity for Indians are neither readily there nor not there: They have to be conceived and envisioned through the application of a creative mind. The desired acceptance cannot be achieved by the free distribution of manifold copies of a spiritually shallow, ill-digested and under-matured Western conception of Jesus and of the Christian religion.

In the African continent, in Australia, and in the Americas, where there did not already exist a profoundly spiritual religion that is several millennia old with its consorts in the form of highly developed architecture, art, music and literature, the Church did not face this challenge to its ability to creatively redesign its offering according to the market. Expecting a similar facile triumph in India, the Church came up against intangible resistance and it tried to come to terms with it by denigrating the native genius of India and by shallow sugar-coated offerings of dogma, seen by thinking people since more than a century as ridiculous and irrelevant to the times. Understandably, this exercise driven by mental, intellectual and spiritual inertia failed.

What is to be done then?

First and foremost, the Church must jettison its millennia-old notion of sin which the Spirit of India rejects as the eye rejects the dust that settles in it. The sons and daughters of Bharat Mata know that there is no sin, there are only errors of understanding. And they too are errors that will be corrected as the individual human spirit refines its understanding of Reality through experience.

Secondly, the Church must opt for the supreme security derived from the freedom of the human spirit rather than the false security of dogma, the notion of heresy and the narrow rigidity of what is termed as Christian Truth or Christian Faith. She must opt for the security of the open air and of men and women strong enough to bear the cold

bracing blast of the heavens in place of the false security of closed doors and stuffed windows.

Thirdly, the Church in India must choose the eclecticism that is the secret of the survival of the oldest religion, the oldest culture, the oldest civilization upon the surface of the earth. A strong religion can afford to consider the possibility that there is truth in what is not at present part of its belief system, while a weak religion cannot afford not to consider such possibility.

In this context, we note that the eclectic embracing of various belief systems and world views that characterizes the spirit of India and of which the Hindu religion is a beneficiary, has been falsely interpreted as the Hindu equivalent of Christian proselytism. But there is a basic difference – the second is negative and exclusivistic whereas the former is positive and inclusive.

It is not true that the three measures described above would change the religion of the Church entirely and unrecognizably into something else. In the grand vision of the *Vishwaroopa* in the Bhagavad Gita, the Supreme One appears with innumerable heads and hands and faces and bodies. Some of these are the heads, hands, faces and bodies of Jesus Christ and the Christian Saints, and Reality speaks to us human beings through their many tongues as much as through the Trimurthy of Hinduism, and the avatars of Vishnu. This statement should be interpreted not as arrogation of Jesus Christ into the Hindu pantheon, but as expressive of a larger Reality of which the two are equally valid and potent manifestations.

When the Church sees this great vision of the Universal, then indeed her work will be seen by its beneficiaries to be the work of God, and the Cross will be planted in this great land as the visiting Pope in 1999 wished it should be – not indeed on its shifting sands, but in the hearts of its myriad peoples – not by baptism, but through the life and work of living representatives of a great Lover of Humanity – living examples of what He wanted His apostles to be.

Catholics need to be freed from Conversion Mania

Govind Bharathan

Govind Bharathan, a prominent advocate at the High Court of Kerala, recalls with gratitude the open-mindedness, which the Catholics had some years ago. He feels that now a conversion mania has poisoned their minds and betrayed their motivation in running schools and social welfare centres. In his observation many Catholic teachers and preachers caricature Hindu myths and scriptures today and create confusion in the minds of the poor and uneducated Hindus. The superficial forms of inculturation are unacceptable to Hindus. He concludes by saying that the Catholic Church can have a significant role in India in promoting a culture of inter-religious harmony provided that its educational and social services are free from proselytizing interests.

I am a practicing Hindu, initiated into Hindus' rites and rituals. I have studied the Scriptures of my faith in some degree of depth and I am often invited to speak on subjects concerning Hindu Spirituality and Culture. I have also conducted a deep study into the meaning and significance of the Hindu Temple. I was also a member of the Governing Council and Board of Trustee of the Viswa Hindu Parishad and I am connected to various front organizations of the Parishad like the Bharathiya Abhibashaka Parishad, Bharath Vikas Parishad etc.

I am a designated Senior Advocate of the High Court of Kerala having 40 years of practice. It was my good fortune to take part in a unique dialogue programme: "Reinhard's Dream, an Inter-religious Dialogue in Living Together in Harmony". This dialogue was the brain child of one of the most sincere and dedicated Christians I have met in my life. His name was Reinhard von Kirchbach. He was a retired bishop of the Lutheran Church of West Germany. This dialogue has taken me round the world several times and we have conducted 14 sessions of Inter-religious meetings in Germany, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Japan and the Bali Islands. I hence have a reasonably pervasive view of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. This background about me is given so that my views regarding the Catholic Church in India can be appreciated in its correct perspective.

My high school education was in St. Michael's High School, Cannanore, an institution run by the Jesuits. In those days every day in school started with the Lord's Prayer. There was an ancient Church next to the school building which I used to visit very often and which still remains in my mind as a place of abiding peace and holiness. I do not recollect any priest or Catholic teacher of the school ever trying to influence my thinking or guiding me towards the Catholic faith. We had some outstanding Jesuit teachers mostly from Mangalore and Madras. The education imparted to us was of a high standard which has stood me well in life. I assert that there was absolutely no effort by any teacher, priest or otherwise to influence my line of thinking in religious matters or my mode of life.

This attitude appears to be totally different from the ethos now prevailing in several Catholic educational institutions. Very often parents have complained that their children are being taught to deride Hinduism in general and Hindu deities in particular. I thought this was a unique Indian/Keralite approach to young pupils, but was informed during my visit to Sri Lanka that almost an identical approach is being adopted towards Buddhist children who were taught misleading and sometimes false stories about Buddha and the Buddhist faith. Surprisingly Muslim children are left alone for reasons I do not wish to elaborate upon. Children are often given photographs of Jesus and Mary and are told to hide these photographs from their parents. They are asked how

their parents can worship animals like elephants and monkeys (Lord Ganesa and Lord Hanuman). They are also told that no man or woman can have four hands or three eyes as Hindu deities are normally portrayed as having. Several parents have informed me that their children are often confused by such debasing versions of their religion told to them by their Christian teachers. This overt and covert attempt to convert Hindu pupils to the Christian faith is according to me the chief failing of the Catholic Church. It poses a great danger to the Hindu faith because a majority of the schools in Kerala are run by the Catholic Church.

The effort to convert does not end with schools. One day my sister was accosted in a not so busy byline by a smartly dressed boy who told her that she looked sad and depressed; he proceeded to give her a long lecture on the Christian faith explaining how it could change her life and make it more meaningful. Expensive books and pamphlets were offered to her free by this young man. I asked a Catholic priest whether this young man was attempting such conversion tactics on his own time, spending money on the reading material or whether he was being sponsored by the Catholic Church. The reply was a thundering silence.

Apart from such overt attempts at conversion there is also a parallel and perhaps an insidious attempt to copy common Hindu rituals and observances and fit it in to a Catholic religious background. Catholic priests very often wear saffron robes and are known to conduct worship while seated on the ground using incense sticks, hand bells and camphor lights, of course dedicating the pooja to either an image or a statue of Christ which is made to look as Hindu-oriented as possible. I have heard that a *Sahasranama* (1000 names) has been written in the name of Christ, having a very close sonorous affinity to the Hindu *Sahasranamas* to Lord Vishnu, or Lord Siva. I also heard that a Jesus *Suprabhatham* (morning hymn) has been composed on the lines of the ancient Lord *Venkateswara Suprabhatham*, which is sung early in the morning in traditional Hindu homes. Perhaps the most blatant and obvious attempt to imitate in order to deceive is in depicting the birth, life and death of Christ in the form of Indian dance, attempting a ludicrous cross between classic *Bharathanatyam* and *Kathakali*.

Of course, the intellectual Hindus reject such blatant attempts to imitate to deceive. But the effect that such attempts have on the mind of unsophisticated, uninitiated poor and uneducated Hindus can only be considered as a serious threat and an invasion of their right to practice their religion without interference from any alien source.

I have met truly dedicated Catholics who have studied the Hindu scriptures and are aware of the depth of the Hindu faith. It is such enlightened priests and laymen who seek genuine inter-religious dialogue with other religions. But at the same time I have also encountered Catholics who have studied the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharatha* to deliberately twist the stories out of shape, in an attempt to misrepresent these *Itihasas* to the Hindu world.

I must conclude by saying that Catholics especially in Kerala have been able to provide unequalled excellence in education and medicare. Catholic nurses, even when they serve in non-Catholic institutions have a sense of dedication and discipline which flows from their devotion to Christ. I have met priests who participate in community life with single minded dedication to uplift the poor and the needy without any strings attached to their religion or religious beliefs. The Catholic Church would do well if it encouraged such dedicated doctors, educationists, social workers and priests who render services to society without the strings of conversion attached.

Chintamoni
Kacheripady
Kochi - 682018

Catholics should not use their Services as Baits for Conversion

R. K. Bharathan

R.K. Bharathan, a writer and well-experienced teacher in several high-ranked institutes of management studies in India and the USA, recalls the good contacts he had with Catholics in his formative years. Celebrating Christmas in a Hindu-Christian context was a grace-filled experience in his life. He asks why Catholic colleges sometimes show discrimination in admitting well-qualified Hindu students, why preachers forbid Catholics paying respect to Hindu places of worship, why Catholics use their services as baits to convert Hindus to Christianity. He reminds the Church that it should give serious attention to the Hindu critique on the Church's blatant discrimination and proselytisation

Two Italian Jesuit priests, Father Angeletto and Father Studrus, who were successive Head Masters of St. Michael's High School, Cannanore, imbedded in me an abiding love for the Roman Catholic Church. They were stalwarts, who taught by example the need to respect all religions, castes and creeds. Besides singing for the school choir, I enjoyed celebrating Christmas with them, and they taught me table-manners, and the need to dress appropriately for each occasion. I still remember that the class teachers would fall silent when the Azim's call to prayer filtered into the class-room.

An equally strong influence was my mother, Mrs. Lily Barathan, who had pictures of Mary, the divine Mother of Velankanni and of St. Francis of Assisi in our *Pooja* room; she used to light candles before them on festival days. She often visited churches and lit candles before the altar.

When I finally settled down in Madras, through the Y's Men's Club of the Y. M. C. A. Ashok Nagar, I became closely associated with several Catholic families, mainly of Goan origin. I still cherish the memory of celebrating Christmas with the Mendanha family. Grandpa Mendanha, his son Freddie Mendanha and my son Shrinath (who was Grandpa's violin student) played Christmas carols in concert on their violins, when the rest of us sang carols, before hogging the best of Goanese cusine.

My son is married to a Christian girl and one of my cousins has been converted to Catholicism after marrying a Catholic. My whole family has not objected and we have maintained the best of relations with these girls, their children and families. I have always appreciated the organized manner in which Catholics celebrate functions like christening, weddings and funerals.

My first face-off with Catholics was when a prominent Catholic college refused to admit a brilliant Hindu student for the coveted Bachelor of Commerce course. The Principal told me bluntly that they had to give preference to Catholic students even when they had much lower marks. I had stubbed my toe against rank religious discrimination by this famed Catholic institution. However this did not prevent the temple in K. K. Nagar, Chennai, which I headed for well over two decades, from offering daily *Anna Dhanam*, educational scholarships and medical grants to Christians and Muslims.

I am deeply upset by the blatant brain-washing of less-educated financially dependant Hindus by the Catholic clergy. Our Catholic woman-cook who has been with us for quite some time, but has yet to step into our *Pooja* room, as she was told that it would be a sin. But what is infuriating is to see Catholic educational and medical institutions, more particularly de-addicting centers, well established over the years, using their services as baits to convert Hindus to Christianity.

I see no harm in Catholic priests switching to long *jubba* instead of wearing cassocks, or in nuns wearing bark-colored saris; I think it is good that they have abandoned their erstwhile head-gear.

Though I was president of the Y's Men's Club of K. K. Nagar, I have not known of any planned Catholic initiative to promote healthy dialogue with Hindus. The Church has still not assessed the militancy that is gaining ground in Hinduism with Institutions like the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* and *Kshetra Samrakshana Samiti* openly criticizing the Church for blatant discrimination and proselytisation. They are demanding tangible changes in Church's educational, medical and social functioning. I think, the futile attempt to install a cross on the hills surrounding *Sabarimala*, was an atrocity that infuriated Hindus, giving impetus to Hindu chauvinism.

The slew of news in media about priests, who are known pedophiles, ruthlessly exploiting helpless children in Church-run institutions, berates the Church. Still worse is the subtle attempt to influence the Catholic vote bank through pastoral letters in favor of Catholic candidates in general elections.

There is so much each religion can learn from the other, and the emphasis must be healthy interaction, not dangerous confrontation.

I congratulate Jeevadhara, and sincerely hope that its initiative will spark a series of open-hearted dialogues between Hindus and Catholics, to promote mutual goodwill between the two communities.

Chennai

Catholic Institutions must promote Value-based Education

N. R. Menon

Prof. N. R. Menon, educator and social activist in Kochi, received sound ethical formation and an attitude of respect for other religions from his early upbringing. Through an infection of paralytic polio in early childhood his mobility was considerably reduced. Still he reaches out to thousands of school children and college students with his ardent message of character formation on sound ethical principles. He established an Institute for Value Education with free service to educational centres. Children are impressed more by his person than through his words. Prof. Menon is very much associated with Catholic schools and colleges. He believes that the Catholic Church should take a lead in promoting genuine value-based education integrating the noble messages of all religions.

My tryst with Christian theology and experiences began when I was quite young. I learned at the feet of my grandfather who was a lawyer with social conscience and who was also interested in the Scriptures of major religions. He was particularly fond of the Bible; he was a Hindu loving Holy Bible. Leisurely afternoons were filled with his soft voice explaining the love of Christ as told by the four authors of the Gospels. I could experience the power of the words by the Lord "I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for yourselves".

(Mt 11:28). Then often he talked about the love that Lord Rama had for his subjects and how much of an exemplary King he was. Thus a world of peace and righteousness was filling the heart of a young disabled boy that I was. For me Jesus and Rama were more than icons of Scriptures. They became part of my own spiritual experience. It was a humble beginning of my so called inter-religious pilgrimage.

Later, much later, when I studied for a short while at St. Thomas University, Rome, with a scholarship provided by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, my grandfather's vision of Christ was expanding in me. He had passed away long back. His blessing became destiny for me. I could never go to any school due to the immobility caused by paralytic polio affecting both legs; but I could study in a Catholic College, after passing my matriculation through private study. This College became a great adventure for me for it was the first time that I was stepping into a formal class room! Fr. Principal and my noble teachers were mostly Catholics they made me what I am today and my indebtedness to my Alma Mater can never be paid off. Memories of those days of motivation are like amaranth. They never fade. During those days Catholic Schools and Colleges were the only excellent centers of learning in my vicinity. They were providing not just the academic disciplines but much more the fundamental value orientation in word, letter and spirit.

Later when I became a devotee of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, I got a further fillip to learn and practice in daily life, the love of God, God of all religions. Then came the blessing to interact with my own students (I was running a private college) as well as with students of umpteen colleges and schools of Kerala, most of them being Catholic institutions. The experiences at the Jesuit Lumen-Jyothis Institute, Kochi, and with the World Fellowship of Inter religious Councils have also been enriching.

In all Sai bhajan centers around the world we listen to inter-religious prayers and we worship the images of Christ and Krishna. It is not just theory. It is practice. It is experience. Minds have no narrow walls. Service is also important, more important. Sai Baba used to tell us: *Hands that serve are more important than lips that pray.*

Now I am involved as a teacher in the curriculum of cultural education in the three campuses of Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham,

Kochi. As I interact with students of diverse religions, from Engineering to M.B.A. to degree classes, my past experiences and learning stand me in good stead. "There is only one truth, but proclaimed in many ways" Rig Veda). I have no problem to deal with students of different religious backgrounds.

But I am sad. Somehow religions fail to motivate human beings in the art of true love. The maxim "fatherhood of God and brotherhood of humans" is practiced more in its violations than in its religious observance! Parents and students look for marks only at the centers of learning. Character formation is ignored at home, in the school, in the college. As a result, there is a marked increase of crime rate, suicides, all round violence, unholy consumer culture and the craving to make money at any cost. The solution lies in the proper value orientation: right from early childhood one should learn basic human values; religions have a great responsibility in this regard.

Today colleges have become hi-tech learning centers where value awareness is given least importance. Children grow up with a lot of information necessary and unnecessary, but this does not lead to the transformation of personality; there is least motivation to lead exemplary lives. Here Catholic educational institutions have a vital role to play. They should take lead in a transforming education strategy where the qualities of heart must be developed along with the qualities of head. Catholic Institutions can be torch-bearers in this because they model themselves after the unique personality of Jesus. The teachings of Rama, Krishna and Buddha as well as the message of the Koran must be brought into focus. Life should become simple and sincere, attitudes helping and not hurting, dealings loving and serving all. Hasn't the Lord said this: "If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:14).

Master Coaching Board,
Kaloor, Kochi. 682017

Catholics should foster Dialogue-initiatives without Bias and Prejudice

Ulloor M. Parameswaran

Prof. Ulloor M. Parameswaran, Retired Professor of Library & Information Science, University of Calicut, had close associations with Catholics at the university and societal levels. He appreciates the religious discipline and social commitment of Catholics. But he feels that some of the activities of Catholic missions make Hindus distrust them. He suggests that Catholics should invite Hindu activist groups to the dialogue sessions in order to make these initiatives effective and bias-free.

Both in the past and the present I had many Christian acquaintances: friends, colleagues, teachers and students, both Catholics and others. I had occasion to move closely with some Catholic friends. I have attended many Christian marriages in the Church both Catholic and non-Catholic. Generally I consider them as Christians and do not distinguish them as Catholics and non-Catholics.

I started reading the Bible when I got a free copy presented by the Bible Society at the time of my first graduation. I have read the four Gospels many times. I respect Jesus Christ and his teachings. But as a true Hindu, I cannot consider Jesus as the only way to attain salvation.

I appreciate the faith of Catholics shown by regularity in visiting the church, reading the Bible daily, thanking God for giving their daily bread, chanting the name of Jesus etc. I also appreciate the importance given by Catholics to religion on the occasions like Marriage, child birth, death and social ceremonies like house warming.

The Catholic missionaries have done both good and bad to India and Hindu society. They were pioneers in propagating English education which has helped Indians to understand the scientific progress in the rest of the world. Their services in the field of social and medical services should also be acknowledged. Some of the missionaries have contributed much to the development of Dravidian languages and literature. I do not distinguish Catholics and non-Catholics here. Caldwell, Herman Gundert (German missionaries), Benjamin Bailey, G. U. Pope (Protestant missionaries), C.G Beschi and Arnose Pathiri (Jesuit priests) are a few names I can remember in this regard. The works of the Christian missionaries in the areas of medical and social services are also commendable. However, they have caused damage to Hinduism and Hindu temples. The atrocities done by the Portuguese in the past cannot be forgotten.

I do not believe in the concept of *original sin*. The belief that Adam was the first human being is against the theory of evolution. The *original sin* is only a natural instinct of any living being. This is better explained by the Hindu philosophers by the concept of *maya*. Why should missionaries frighten people in the name of a sin of the past for which they are not responsible?

Indian culture and tradition will remain intact only if Hinduism continues to exist as the dominant religion of India. Any effort to change it cannot be welcomed. I do not believe in the Saint Thomas myth. I think it is a cooked up story to make Hindus believe that Christians of Kerala have descended from Brahmins (*Nampoothiris*).

Do Catholics provoke fundamentalism? I do not have an affirmative answer to this question. However many recent activities of Catholic missions have created distrust in them and make Hindus feel that their primary aim is not social service but religious conversion. It has been alleged that they support the insurgent groups and their anti-national

activities in North Eastern States. Such reports cause distrust in the Hindu society.

I know of some dialogue initiatives of Catholics efforts. A meeting of Catholics with Hindu religious leaders took place in Bangalore in 2010. But these initiatives did not yield much concrete results. Such efforts should be continued, but I think that unless Hindu activist groups are also participated in such dialogues it is not going to bring out conspicuous results.

Catholics should promote inter-religious discussions and seminars without bias or prejudice. They should stop conversion work and concentrate on social service and educational activities. They should try to understand and respect all religions as pathways leading to the realization of God. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa had proved that.

Beyepore

Kozhikode -673015

Catholic Schools must promote the Study of Religions

Meha Mathur

Meha Mathur is positive about the good education that the Christian schools impart to children. However she observes that no serious acquaintance with the Bible or the message of Jesus is communicated to the young minds. Ignorance about the other religions breeds unnecessary suspicion. Educational institutions should be the place where children learn to know and respect the other religions.

In forming any opinion of Christianity and Christians, Indian Hindus don't generally differentiate between Catholics and Protestants; they club them together. This is despite some education at college level about the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism. To some of us the context of conflict and the fissures between them is still not clear. What we know is that Protestants departed from many practices that Catholics continue to adhere to.

So when I talk of my perception of Catholicism it's a picture about Christianity itself. At the school level the knowledge and awareness imparted about Christianity is next to nil. Schools do have Christmas celebrations: kids go to school dressed up as Santa Claus, and with a tiny Christmas tree in their hand. Barring ICSE schools, most students do not get any exposure to what religion is all about. At this stage of

my life, I feel that lack, and realize how much richer education would have been if we had known something about the Bible, the life of and message of Jesus, Christian fables, places of religious importance and other aspects. We ought to have learnt more about Islam too.

From that lack of awareness spread other forms of ignorance. There's a set image of Christianity: Churches, Christmas carols, cakes, Christmas gifts etc. Nothing beyond that! And when we think of Indian Christians, we have the same perception of them. This perception is confirmed by reading English works and watching some Indian movies.

When I entered St Stephens, Delhi and found that some of the fellow Christian students used to converse in Hindi as fluently as we Hindus do, it was a big surprise to me. Surprising was also the fact that they enjoyed the same food as we do.

And now, my daughter is equally perplexed that my Christian colleague at office is as Indian as me. She asks questions like "Why does Tessy Aunty speak Hindi when she is a Christian? Why does she eat roti and not bread?" To satisfy my daughter's curiosity, Tessy once told her, "When I got married, I did not wear that long gown shown in films, I wore a sari with a golden border." This was a revelation to me too.

A thought that comes to my mind when discussing Christianity in India is the issue of conversion and the unfortunate incidents of violence in the recent years. Yes, the fear of conversion does exist among Hindus. And that has a historical background to it. When the British came to India, the missionaries did embark upon conversion projects with great zeal. Hindus are afraid that Christians want to increase their number. They are also worried about the political ramifications in terms of votes. And they are worried about cultural and social ramifications too. However the fact that Christian schools impart good education to children cannot be overlooked.

Catholics are to take more Interest in knowing other Religions

Meenakshi Khanna

Dr. Meenakshi Khanna, Associate Professor of History at the Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, recalls her acquaintance with Catholics during the school days. She esteems the care and concern, affectionate behaviour and disciplined practices of the Catholic sisters who made the message of Jesus alive in her life. But she finds that Catholics do not seem to take interest in knowing Hindu beliefs and customs in depth. Knowledge of the religious other must be communicated right from the school days so that a culture of respect grows in our country.

As I am writing down my impressions on Catholics my mind travels back to my kindergarten days. As a child my perception of this other faith was constructed with reference to what I knew of my own religion. At home my grandmother, took charge of educating her grandchildren about matters of faith and religion. This essentially meant that she would instruct us about ethics of social conduct, familial norms, certain dietary restrictions and she would also read to us numerous stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. We would accompany her to watch the local *Ramlila* and, since she was an *Arya samajist*, we would also accompany her to the local Arya Samaj

temple to watch the consecration of a *havan* or listen to some special speech of a revered *guru*. I realized at a very young age that to be a *Hindu* meant negotiating complexities between two contrasting strains of the same faith. My grandfather, all his three sons, and their wives, were *Sanatnists*. There were occasional arguments in our household as the majority of its members supported *Sanatnist* rituals like *vratas*, *pujas*, and worshipping of idols; my grandmother would rather criticize the irrationality of meaningless rituals and emphasize on the Vedic *havan*. Eventually all such arguments concluded with the observance of both kinds of rituals in our family. This accommodating attitude guided our approach to other religions as we were taught to respect all faiths.

My earliest association with Christians happened more than three decades ago when I was admitted to a kindergarten near our home. Although my encounter with Catholics started at a tender age this does not mean that I was familiar with the basics of the Catholic faith. This tiny school was run by two enterprising sisters who lived in the 'Christian Colony' in Karol Bagh, New Delhi. This kindergarten was patronized by our family, and all six children in our joint-family learnt their initial alphabets and numbers here before seeking admission in bigger institutions for completing their schooling. It is obvious that our parents had great faith in schools run by Christian missionaries.

Facing our courtyard, and on the other side of the 8 feet wide lane, was a massive pink brick building with a slanting roof that was mounted with a big white cross. We called it the *Girija* or Church but did not understand it to be a place for worship of Christians exclusively. We interacted with the resident pastor and his family as we did with other neighbours. We were curious about this building as we heard the gongs and bells on every Sunday and watched droves of people entering into the building's main courtyard. My curiosity about the interior was satisfied several years later when we were invited by the resident pastor to join the Christmas celebrations.

My formal acquaintance with Catholics happened during the post-kindergarten stage of schooling. Our family had great respect for educational institutions run by the Catholic missionaries because they were committed to teaching; they instructed in the English language,

inculcated discipline and simplicity, welcomed children from diverse socio-economic groups, and most importantly their fee was affordable. I was enrolled in Carmel Convent School at Chanakya Puri in New Delhi.

I was fascinated by the sparkling white hoods and flowing habits of the nuns who meticulously manned our school. They were polite, soft spoken, graceful, and firm as steel. They were probably all residing on the campus, which was a small building surrounded with gardens full of sweet smelling flowers. I remember visiting the Chapel a few times to say a quick prayer for doing well in the exam.

At school we started the day with the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and singing hymns from the Psalms without really following the Christian content of our supplications. My sister and I would enthusiastically recite these before our indulgent grandparents and parents who never objected to our unconscious appropriation of Catholic rituals. The hymns had beautiful tunes and I loved watching the sisters playing the piano or gently tapping a ruler on the left palm to keep the beat as they coached the choir.

There are other impressionistic memories from my days at the school of the Apostolic Carmel sisters. Paintings displaying the religious iconography of Catholicism adorned the walls of the classrooms and corridors as did the icon of the bleeding Christ on the Cross. In the moral science class we read stories from the lives of great men and women of different faiths, including Jesus Christ. Often, some pamphlets with coloured illustrations from the life of Jesus Christ were circulated and free copies of the Psalms and the Bible were offered to students. One did not mind contributing towards the cause of charity, and students were encouraged to put something in the 'box for the poor' that was the permanent feature of every class room in our school.

In middle school I was grown up enough to have developed some signs of conformity towards my own faith. Although I had a generous exposure to Catholicism and was curious about this religion and its rituals, love for my family tradition was moulded unconsciously by the circumstance of my socialization. For instance, I did not find the stories from the life of Jesus as interesting or exciting as the ones that Biji told

us from the Epics and the Puranas. The *Ramlila* and *Krishnalila* were colourful, musical dance-dramas contextualized in familiar geographical spaces, whereas the tabloid of Christ's Nativity at Bethlehem appeared geographically and culturally alien to me. Also it was easier to imagine gods and goddesses in *dhoti* and *saree*. I imagined Jesus with long golden locks and dressed in flowing robes, someone distant from my socio-cultural horizon. My impression of the Catholic faith was conditioned by the austerity of our school routine. We did start our morning with thanking 'Our Father in Heaven', and did hear the daily sermon read out by the principal over the intercom. Simplicity, modesty, and above all God-fearing attitudes were instilled amongst the pupils. It appeared to me that the *Catholic* God was to be feared more than loved. So, mortal beings must perpetually repent for their sins or else suffer the pain of punishment. At home we did not reflect much on the concept of sin or the routine of supplications, there was a common understanding that if we do not do good deeds in this life we will suffer consequences in the next. Therefore the emphasis at home was on improving our present *karma*, and celebration of life in observance of various festivities.

I graduated from Carmel with some idea about Christianity, and some vague notions about the schism between the Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity. At St. Stephen's College, Delhi, our concerns were purely academic and the religious identity of the institution never really bothered us, until the question of its minority status was politicized in the early 1990s. By that time, however, I had moved on to the Jawaharlal Nehru University for pursuing a Ph.D.

The Vidyajyoti College of Theology in Delhi is a home for any scholar researching religious history. I researched on Sufism – a mystical dimension of Islam. By a happy coincidence in life I started teaching in a College which was within walking distance of this library. Vidyajyoti reminds me of my school in many ways. The inmates both faculty and students are gentle, polite, and disciplined. The lawns are neatly manicured and interiors clean and uncluttered. Over the last seventeen years or so that I have been a member of its library; Vidyajyoti has become an important symbol for me. It is a source of academic inspiration for me, a secret haven where I hide when things are not

working for me and a place to seek counsel with friends when I am distressed about the vicissitudes of life. The fact that it is a training centre of Catholic faith did not disturb me at all.

As a frequent visitor here I do witness the ceremonials and festivities of the inmates. On such occasions there are conversations concerning the indigenous content of Indian Catholic rituals, community projects undertaken by its younger members, current issues in gender discourse, and various other academic and national concerns. I have always received answers for my queries into the concepts and practices of the residents here. What I have found lacking, however, is a reciprocal curiosity about my practices as a Hindu. Perhaps, since the residents of Vidyajyoti are scholars of religion and theology, they are informed about the diverse religious traditions, and hence have no curiosity to enquire about them as such. Or, perhaps they lack interest and may even be dismissive about the practices of the *other*. In spite of this observation I feel that there is a very strong and vibrant dialogue between us. Our discourse is fundamentally humane in nature, while issues concerning organized religion are somehow removed to the periphery.

I shall remain ever indebted to these temples of learning that have shaped my personality fundamentally. In the course of writing this response, however, some of my dormant curiosities have become active. How do the Catholics perceive us Hindus? Are their observations stereotypical in the sense that they imagine Hindus to be a *monolithic* community? Are they anxious to proselytize and make people think their way? I do not expect any uniform responses to these queries because human perception is conditioned by multiple socio-economic, cultural, and political factors at a particular time in history.

Indraprastha College for Women
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Are we all Co-Pilgrims? From a Live-together Experience

The following issues came up from a three day live-together with Hindus and Catholics in the year 2000. The texts of the II. Vatican Council and the allocutions of Pope John Paul II on inter-religious dialogue were studied and reflected upon in an inter-religious process. There was a beautiful atmosphere of openness and fraternity. At the end the Catholics requested the Hindu friends to formulate their questions on the new epoch of dialogue that the Catholic Church advocates. Their frank response was the following:

We welcome the openness, that you Catholics have developed towards other religions and appreciate the world-wide initiatives to promote inter-religious dialogue and fellowship. But do you really take us respectfully as equal partners in inter-religious dialogue, as co-pilgrims towards the one divine goal?

It is great vision to perceive the power of the divine Logos and the presence of the divine Spirit in all religions. But how come, you find in our religions only *seeds of the Logos* and *rays of the Truth*, only a *secret presence of God* often mixed with taints of evil, awaiting the Christian missionary for unfolding and purification? (NA.2, GS.22, AG11)

You are basically very positive in describing religions as the expressions of the *longing for God* and as the *articulation of the questions about the profound mysteries of life*. But on what basis

can you assert that Christianity is the only true religion and the *ordinary means of salvation*? Can there be an objective criterion for the distinction that you make in this regard? On what basis do you claim that other religions are *only a search for God*, while Christianity is *the revealed religion*? How can you objectively substantiate your belief that in other religions only human search is articulated while in Christianity God comes in person to speak to man of Himself. (NA 1, RM. 55-56)

It is a beautiful insight that the history of humanity is the process of *the age-long dialogue of God with humanity*. God does continue to speak to human persons and communities in diverse ways. But on what basis do you claim that Jesus Christ is the *fulfillment of this universal revelatory dialogue*, and that the Church has the *fullness of revelation*? Is there anything absolute in the flux of history? On what score can one establish an absolute norm that determines the validity of all religious experiences? (John Paul II, 13.11.92, DV. 4, RM. 56)

You speak to us with a high sense of the universal history of humanity. Our traditional religions too have a long history and rich heritage. We have our sacred Scriptures and venerable Masters. Any attempt from the Christian side to underrate them or to interpret them as predisposition for the Christian faith (*praeparatio evangelica*) is questionable. (AG.3)

You concede today that believers of other religions *can be saved*, and even non-believers. But you are not yet prepared to respect the other religions as valid means of salvation. You are afraid that the saving figures of other religions would get undue validity and consequently your faith in Christ would lose its absoluteness. How can you respect us as dialogue partners if you are not respecting our salvation experiences in their identity and diversity? (LG.16)

You have rightly perceived a universal truth: there is no genuine dialogue without love. But how can you love your neighbour as yourself, if you are not open to respecting the *God* of your neighbour? Genuine *respect for someone of another religion* demands sensitivity to the

religious sentiments of the other and acceptance of the otherness of the other (John Paul II, 03.03.84).

You understand that the work of the Spirit is universal, limited neither by space nor time. This could help you to respect the uniqueness of the other. Still you tend to consider the classical European culture as the superior culture and the norm to measure the worth of other cultures. Do you not in a subtle way identify Christianity with western culture?

By proclaiming the fundamental right to religious freedom to the nations, the Catholic Church has done a tremendous service to humanity. You have specifically made it clear that evangelization will be free from any sort of coercion or dishonest persuasion. At the same time you uphold the old axiom in new version: *without the Church there is no salvation!* You seem to advocate that belonging to the Church, the mystical body of Christ, is an essential condition for salvation. Does it not mean a subtle but powerful theological compulsion with absolute demands on the conscience of peoples? (DH.2, John Paul II, 31.05.95)

We wholeheartedly welcome the Christian initiatives to collaborate with us in bringing about *justice and peace in all realms of life* and in all parts of the world. We hope that through these joint-efforts many wounds of the past would be healed and a new civilization of love would be established. But genuine collaboration is possible only if we *meet as equal partners*, totally free from vested interests and hidden motives of any particular religious community. For this we would expect from Catholics that they meet us without a religious election-consciousness and superiority feeling in God's plan of salvation. *Let us walk together in peace and harmony as co-pilgrims* and work together in God's new creation *accompanying one another towards the transcendent goal which God sets for us all* (John Paul II, 29.10.86, 27.10.86).

I. A cross-religious reading of the Holy Scripture

A Hindu Reading the Sermon on the Mount

A. Ramachandran

Introduction

- * The term 'Hindu' is used here to denote not one who conforms to the religious behaviour patterns and ritual cult of the Hindu religion, but a legatee to that understanding of Reality which has been central to the spiritual tradition of India from pre-historic times. This tradition, which has been a vibrant and vivifying influence upon its people over the millennia, is a common heirloom of all humanity, and as freely *available* to all who live in or come to India as the water they drink and the air they breathe.
- * It has been said about Swami Vivekananda (by Romain Rolland) that it was very difficult to convince him of anything – because for him, conviction imperatively meant an obligation to put into practice in his own life. Approaching the Sermon on the Mount (and indeed all Jesus' teaching) in this practical spirit, I am not daunted by the huge mass of exegesis that overlies it. My concern is not to dispute about the variations between and even mutual oppositions of painstaking commentators, - sometimes on trivial matters, - but to arrive at an understanding that would guide and enlighten our personal life in this world.

To say this is not to imply that it is possible or permissible to have an interpretation of Jesus and his teaching which does not take into

account his person and his teaching, but would be only a reflection of my predispositions. I am well warned that a personalized understanding cannot be divorced from, but must be built upon, the historical Jesus and the understanding of his teaching that has well served his followers for two millennia. It is to *fulfill* his teaching that I must aim.

- * I have no difficulty with the difference between the spiritual dimensions of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and the secular-societal overtones of Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Spirituality is not *other-worldliness* and unconcern for the affairs of this world. Spirituality is the placing of this world and its concerns in the context of a possible larger existence.
- * Finally, we bring to our reading, a commitment to the significance of the individual – a belief that the individual should not and cannot be submerged in the community or the *sangha*. The solution to the riddle of human existence lies *on the far side of* man's individuality. It is through the territory of, what psychologists call, individuation, ie. not by withdrawal from the world that the path to the Supreme is to be traced. It is not by evasion of the trauma of our separateness by forming a community of billiard balls in a jar, but by experiencing and transcending the trauma, that we will attain *moksha* or salvation; we will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, or bring forth the Kingdom upon earth.

It has been necessary to state here these premises to my Hindu understanding of the Christian teaching, without which any commentary on it would deteriorate into either shallow criticism or the platitudes of equally shallow approval.

The Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12)

The Beatitudes would appear to stand together under the one overarching umbrella of the mind-state that qualifies a traveler for entry into the Kingdom of God. A loosely comparable state (but minus the implied higher, impersonal suffering) is that of the Hindu understanding of the man or woman passes (i) from the dull *tamasika* state of inaction, self-indulgence and lazy malevolence, (ii) through the active *rajasika* state of action, achievement and triumph in the world, (iii) to the high wisdom of true goodness of the *satvika* state. This is not beyond result-

oriented action in the world yet, but restricted to action within the disciplining influences of love and non-violence, honesty and humility, compassion and forbearance. Of such material is made the tool that is beginning to be ready in the Maker's hand.

5:3: *Blessed are the poor in spirit: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* The poor in spirit are they who have come to realize that there is no genuine and/or durable satisfaction except in the Supreme One whom we call God. (*Anyathha sharanam naasti, tvameva sharanam*: I have no sustenance except in You, You alone are my support!) However, it should be noted that this does not denote the sentimentalism which most commonly passes as *bhakti* or devotion. It is an attitude that comes of having tasted of everything that the world can offer and seen the vanity of it all, and then turning (or rather, returning) to God (Ecclesiastes 1:14, 12:1,13).

5:4: *Blessed are they that mourn: they shall be comforted.* They do not mourn for their own petty ephemeral selves, for the joys that they yearn for and the sorrows that they suffer. For by temperament, they have transcended self-interest as a result of an abiding awareness of the vanity of its pursuit. But this has not enabled them to transcend interest in others, and concern for the sufferings of all life-forms that they see around them each waking day. These sufferers shall be comforted: for they shall be granted a vision of a greater goodness that transcends the joys and sufferings of this world, in which all life is included. Is such goodness only a weak, sentimental, wishful dream? Or does it really exist somewhere? If it does not exist today, will it come into existence some time? The promise of Jesus engenders faith to believe that however deep the blinding gloom that encircles us, there is a kindly light at the end of the long tunnel. But for him who is as yet unable to believe this, there is still the *joy* of his mourning, the joy of the state of liberty from self-interest. It is well: more will follow in its time.

5:5: *Blessed are the meek: they shall inherit the earth.* Meekness does not consist in weakness and lack of enterprise (the state of the *tamasika*). The meek one is capable of forceful, well-conceived and totally effective action. He is even capable of anger like the anger of Jesus in the Temple. But he is always in control of himself, even of his

anger. He is a *sthhithaprajna*, the totally self-harmonized and self-balanced one as described in the Bhagavad Gita. Yudhishtira of the Mahabharata and Moses of the Old Testament are considered to have been meek. Their meekness as well as that of Jesus was the self-chosen peace and non-violence, compassion and forbearance, of the strong man who is confident in his strength and therefore knows how to use it most effectively and to minimum hurt. Theirs was the humility of total self-confidence born of self-sufficiency. Such is the stuff of which God's workers are made. Compared to their meekness, weak indeed is the strength of the straw giants who have stalked through the world, leaving their footprints on the shifting sands of history, so soon-erased by time and tide

5:6: *Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness: they shall be filled.* There is a saying among the Hindus that he, who yearns to see God more than he yearns for anything else, will see God. It is a matter of one's own priorities: one gets what one wants most. If one thinks that he wants one thing more than anything else, but if actually what he yearns for is something else, then he should not be surprised that he does not get the first thing. Righteousness, to my understanding, is the *satvika* state referred to above: the state of a man who has not transcended self-interest, but who has very clear notions – and quite restrictive notions well beyond the imperatives of conventional morality – of how far he would go for its fulfillment. Such a man has no need of the Law, for he has transcended it!

5:7: *Blessed are the merciful: they shall obtain mercy.* Mercy in this context is the ability to empathize, to get inside one's neighbour, to stand in his shoes, to see with his eyes and to feel with his heart. It is not the same as pity which implies the duality of oneself and one's neighbour and does not quite come to loving one's neighbour as oneself. Even kindness and charity, by ordinary understanding, imply duality. But in mercy as we understand it here, a sense of identity is implied. It is only mercy in this sense that is valued by one's neighbour, and hence it is such mercy that is blessed: blessing the one who shows it and the one towards whom it is shown, for all else appears contrived, affected, patronizing, and often hypocritical. Furthermore, in such mercy, one becomes aware of the rather humbling, but supremely ennobling truth,

that one is no better than one's brother, and that placed in his circumstances, one would most probably act no better (7:1-5). Mercy of this nature is its own reward. It enables one to perceive the unity of all existence. "For him who has known all beings as one with his own Self, how shall there be delusion or grief?" (Isavasya Upanishad, 7).

5:8: *Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God.* The life of the God-oriented man, of the man who strives for *moksha*, is a continuous struggle against the Satan of interest in and commitment to the welfare of the ephemeral ego-self. Not only in acts which are by common understanding labeled *selfish*, but also in every act of charity and philanthropy, every gesture of worship, every act of standing up for justice in the world and against oppression, every act ostensibly in the service of God or of humanity, there is the seed of self-aggrandizement, the sense of being the I to whom credit for the work is due. (6:3). It is for this reason that so much of self-sacrificing philanthropic and social upliftment work falls by the wayside, doing more harm in the long run than the good in the short run. Eternal vigilance is the price of the avoidance of this contamination. Constant self-examination alone can help attain and maintain that freedom from the ego-self that is essentially a pre-requisite for seeing God. But let us concede that in exercising this vigilance, we may be charitable to our own weaknesses. The self-absorption that arises from a constant awareness of one's sinfulness does little to help transcend the ego-self (*ahamkara*). As diseases are to be diagnosed and cured, so weaknesses are for overcoming and for transcending, not however for moral self-flagellation, which soon becomes so painful that its pain can be assuaged only by persecution, or at least moral supervision of others who do not have the same sense of sin. And the weakness or impurity that we speak of here is a matter of degree. Absolute purity can perhaps not be achieved while still in this life. In the meantime, we may participate in God's compassion and forgiveness.

These then are the qualities of a person destined for the Kingdom of God or for growing out of the inborn sinfulness, for *Moksha*. How many do we know who fulfill these requirements? Jesus Christ was one. In the entire history of the human race, there may have been but a handful of others. Abraham and Moses might have belonged to this

group. In the Hindu story of Ramayana, Rama qualifies as one. There might have been many who neither spoke nor wrote nor were written about, though their contribution to humankind's journey towards God is not any less significant for that!

Why are the qualifications so rigid that so few qualify for the Kingdom of Heaven? How is it that a merciful God, our loving Father, has set the goals so high for a single lifetime attempt? How does it happen that the few who have the necessary mind-state seem almost to have been born with it rather than to have developed it through any process that we could study and imitate?

These are the questions that we need to address so that some likely answer may help us replace our present life-paradigms with more meaningful ones.

5:9-12: Whether these verses were part of the teaching of Jesus or they were included later to bolster the sinking courage of the persecuted early Church is a question that scholars must answer. But there is an implication here that those who are righteous will be persecuted, and that humankind is essentially unable to respond appreciatively to righteousness, which may be a more pessimistic view than is strictly necessary. (In the two great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, and in the puranas, even kings and emperors are depicted as paying profound obeisance to the righteous.) Further, these verses seem to rationalize and glorify an individual's or a group's inability to live in peace and harmony within an alien environment. They are even taken as implying that being persecuted and reviled is a proof that one is working for Jesus. Do they not subscribe to a sort of persecution mania in Christian circles?

The Rest of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:13- 7:29)

5:13-16: To a great extent, persecution seems to be the result of (i) the notion that faith must always be publicly demonstrated – which contradicts Mt 6:1-6, (ii) a sense of elitism (5:13,14) and (iii) a perceived obligation to go forth and make one's light shine (5:15,16) for the benefit of a world in which all eyes may not be strong enough for it yet. The Hindu view which opposes this is not quietist or passivist. Rather it is an antithesis to Western activism which insists on offering the fruit

before they are ripe and the stomach ready for it, causing all those disorders that come to weak stomachs when food is forced upon them. As Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa has said, the flower does not go about advertising itself to the honeybees. When it has become able to offer honey, the bees come to it on their own. Conversely, if they do not come, it is because what the flower has is not honey yet, or because it is a plastic flower. A failure to take account of this aspect of Reality would probably explain the ego-driven activism of Western Christianity that has resulted in the spilling of so much innocent blood, and still worse, in the breaking of the human spirit in those who wished to maintain an independent religious identity, or were committed to others than to Jesus Christ, or who, in all sincerity and commitment to God as they saw Him, were unable to submit to Christian dogmatism. This is not to argue that we should aim at no improvement or enlightenment of the world, but to suggest that (i) it is in the fullness of time and *of God's will* that we become the instruments of God, and that (ii) true forward movement happens not by destroying the law or the prophets or any current belief systems, but by fulfilling them.

But compared to this process of building upon the past and the alien present, taking full benefit from all that was / is good in it, demolition of what is beyond our limited understanding is a much easier task. And that which is constructed after the demolition in isolation from the past and from the present ambience is like a house built upon sand whose fall will be great (Mt. 7:27); this is a truth that only the history of the human race witnesses, not the individual human life that ends on a false note of triumph or fulfillment.

5:21-32: *But I say unto you.* The primacy of the spirit behind the action which is the core message of these verses is entirely home ground to the Hindu view of morality. Action without the true spirit – the spirit that will enable the action to endure – becomes sinful and spawns evil, however much it may afford a delusive appearance of virtue and goodness in the short term. Conversely, the true spirit without the action that should flow from it is barren. Therefore, good action sustained by the true spirit alone can bring forth the Kingdom of God upon earth. But if a man is not yet equipped with this happy combination, the development of the true spirit must have priority. For a corrupt

tree can bring forth no good fruit. The true husbandman postpones the planting of the tree until he has cleansed of poison the ground around the roots; he perceives no loss of valuable time in this.

5:33-37: These verses spoken 2,000 years ago are a most powerful indictment of the human race's present state of enslavement to Mammon, the money that is to be earned by selling one's soul. A Tamil song popular at the time of India's independence said: "We have proclaimed that all are equal. Now we will not bow down to anyone upon the earth, but will live in submission only to the Perfect One". There are two forces that are active in every period of human history: the force of man's struggle for freedom and the force that seeks to enslave it for a few representatives of Satan who sits in positions of power and influence, religious as well as temporal. The sense of insecurity in the face of their mortality can be salved only by controlling the lives of other mortals, and by controlling their very spirits. Jesus taught us not to swear by anything, not to swear to any specific action or behaviour nor to unconditional and permanent loyalty, but only to say *yes, yes* or *no, no* as prompted by our conscience, the voice of God within us. This might result in suffering, for the insecurity of the powerful will not pardon the insubordination that is tantamount to a censure of the absence of God in their lives. But says Jesus: You cannot serve God and Mammon. And behold the fowls of the air: does our heavenly Father not feed them? And behold the lilies of the field: are they not arrayed better than Solomon in all his glory? (6:28-30).

This teaching of Jesus is entirely true and beyond dispute. In the obedience of it lies the answer to all the suffering that humanity is experiencing in this age when more is being produced for the sensual enjoyment of man and woman, much of the earth's resources is being exploited, and a lot of money is being spent for more unhappiness of the spirit than in any past age! But it is hard to get committed to not swearing by anything or anybody, because slavery affords a security of sorts. The ability to obey this teaching presupposes immense inner strength.

5:38-48: There has been, over the past two centuries, a considerable amount of controversy surrounding these verses which propose a non-violent, non-resistant response to violence, and the verses 5:43-48 which exhort us to a state of mind that would support such response. This idea of Christian non-violence even instigated Nietzsche reactively, to build up a philosophy of the glorification of violence. It is also probably true that the only man who ever carried this idea into practice in his life died on the Cross. But the ennobling value of these verses to a world where each human being and each nation is ever anxious to be the first to slap another on the cheek and the first to snatch away both coat and cloak, and to thus arrogate to oneself the advantage of the first aggressive initiative, can hardly be denied.

But the question remains: To what extent is a non-violent and non-resistant response practicable? Will it really soften the conscience of the perpetrator of violence, so that he ceases to strike us on the cheek? Or will our passivity only encourage further violence? Can it be that there is thus more violence in a non-violent response than in a decisively corrective violent response? It is said that violence begets violence and that peace can be brought about only by a non-violent response. But perhaps the price of peace is a fine balance between the capacity for violence of mutually struggling individuals and nations?

What should I do when I am smitten on my right cheek? Respond by smiting the smiter's cheek, or offer the other cheek, or just run away before being smitten again? If we expect a concrete prescriptive reply, we are stretching beyond human capabilities. Here it is important to remember the message of the importance of the spirit behind the action (5:21-26, 27-32).

Violence is the child of fear in insecurity. When you overcome the fear of the one who smites you on your right cheek, violence ceases. The appropriate and most natural response will then flow from you on its own: *it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall do.*

It is said by evangelists that to know Jesus is to *confess* him, that is, to believe in him and to be converted to him. The Hindu considers this to be entirely true with regard to so much of his teachings. Paying

our reverent obeisance to all such passages in the Sermon on the Mount, we now move on to a few more verses that appear to invite comment.

6:19-21 & 33-34: It is entirely true that the treasures upon earth are corrupted by moth and rust. In Hindu discourses the speakers often say that the joys of this world are ephemeral and that lasting joy can be derived only from the contemplation of God. But one may ask: Why should we wish for only lasting joys? A thing that is good to eat is not any the less good to eat because it soon dissolves in the mouth and goes down the esophagus. When I buy a car at the age of 30, am I deterred by the thought that it may not serve me for all of the two score years that remain to me according to the Bible?

Speaking in more general terms, the *tamasika* with his spirit of lazy desire and self-indulgence must transcend that state by entering that of the *rajasika* in which he will work successfully to fulfill his desires, and it is this fulfillment that will prepare him for sublimation to the *satvika* state, which in turn will lead on to salvation.

In a world where numerically the *tamasika* and the *rajasika* vastly outnumber the *satvika* and the saved ones, it is the Law that must act to maintain society in a state of reasonable balance and peace, however imperfect such Law may seem in a particular age when evaluated in the context of our great vision of human liberty, equality and fraternity. In short, it is only enjoyment that leads to contentment and withdrawal from its object to something higher. Those who believe that this view is far too indulgent of human weakness have an obligation to explain what good has been done by insistence on a direct sublimation from our sinful state to a state of the highest perfection, and that in a single life ever subject to termination without notice and ever subject to impossible temptations.

7:7-11: For those who have not yet, deep within their hearts, grown to a level where they can see these verses as pertaining to their asking and seeking for God and knocking at the door of the Kingdom of God, they must perhaps be interpreted as referring to the goods of this world. But reading in the context of 6:19-20 one sees that they pertain to *moksha*, salvation, release from sin, entry into the Kingdom of God, or the bringing forth of that Kingdom on earth.

What we want in this world may be denied us by those who have the power to, or by competitors who want the same things, or by circumstances beyond our control. For those who are not yet equipped to desist from such wants, the option of praying to a God who will wipe our tears and fulfill our this-worldly needs is a necessary milestone. But it is good to be aware that it is only a milestone, not the destination. True worship, as I have seen written up in one Kerala temple, is that in which there is no prayer, not even for salvation.

Contrary to the things of this world, there is *that* which is never denied: the only condition for receiving it is that we should ask. The only condition for entering at the door is that we should knock. It is not given to all to find the voice to ask, nor is it given to all to raise up the hand to knock. But for such, in His infinite mercy, the offer is never closed.

I would like to end these reflections with a juxtaposition of Matthew 7:21-23 with an extract from one of the Hindu puranas:

Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Those devotees who repeat Krishna, Krishna, but will not follow the dharma and karma taught by the Lord, which He Himself practices when He is incarnate upon earth, – because they do not care for this dharma nor wish to discharge societal responsibilities – these are the enemies of Hari, the Lord.

Waterfront Enclave,
Cochin 682010

II. A cross-religious reading of the Holy Scripture.

A Christian Reading the Bhagavad Gita

S. Painadath

I read the Bhagavad Gita with great respect, for as a Holy Book it has guided millions of Hindus and others in their spiritual life and social commitment. I believe that the Gita is a book of divine revelation and that it communicates the Word of God to spiritual seekers. After the Bible, Gita has the maximum amount of translations, commentaries and editions in world literature. Hence this is the most widely known sacred scripture of India. Seekers of all religions and cultures could take from the Gita inspiration for spiritual pursuits and guidance in ethical life. Gita entered my life as I was eighteen years old and it has never left me ever since. This book played a significant role in my Christian theological explorations and spiritual services.

A Mystical Poem

From the point of view of the literary genre, I read the Gita as a mystical poem. This approach in no way plays down its normative value as a Holy Book nor does it misrepresent its basic message. In fact, a mystical perspective takes the reader right to the heart of a Sacred Book. Every Scripture that communicates a divine message is written from within a deep mystical encounter with the Divine. The divine Spirit touches the strings of the heart of a person and fine melodies evolve. This is what we hear in the *celestial poem* of the Gita. The book is written in the form of a dialogue between Arjuna and Sri

Bhagavan. Arjuna opens his heart to the divine master, and the divine Lord touches his heart and enlightens his path. The dialogue actually takes place within the cave of the heart, the core of a person. "Bhagavad Gita describes the perennial dialogue that is going on within the heart of every human person." (Mahatma Gandhi.)

What then is the mystical experience that is underlying the Gita discourse? Here is someone – and this can be any one of us – who finds oneself on the cross-roads of life. One does not know what to do, where to turn, which step is to take in life. The person in utter crisis realises that the only way to future is to surrender himself/herself to the divine master. This is what the *sadhaka* (the spiritual seeker) of the Gita did: "My mind is perplexed concerning right and wrong. Deep sorrow parches my senses. I cannot see things clearly any more. Oh, divine Master, tell me clearly what is auspicious for me. I am your disciple. I take refuge in you. Teach me! (2:7). At the beginning of the Gita we thus find the human person lying prostrate at the feet of the divine Lord. At the end of the Gita however we find him standing erect with courage and clarity. "My delusion is gone. I have regained the clarity of vision: all through your grace, Oh, Lord. With doubts dispelled I stand firm to act according to your word." (18:73). This is the last word of Arjuna in the discourse.

Something has happened between these two moments. The divine Master liberates the human seeker from the shackles of greed (*kama*) and ego-centricism (*ahamkara*). This is a transforming process. It is in terms of this integral spiritual process that I try to understand the dynamics of the Gita. In this beautiful discourse between an ardent human soul that surrenders itself unconditionally to the Divine and the divine Master who embraces the human in deep love I discover a transforming process of *spiritual exercise*. I read the Gita not as a story of the past but as the description of what is happening within me here and now. In order to enter into the spiritual process of the Gita we need to read it *today*. I become the Arjuna of the Gita and I listen to the words of the divine Master from within my heart.

The tenor of the Gita discourse is love. The divine Master addresses the human seeker as a friend (4:3; 10:1). At the end of the discourse

the divine Master unfolds the deepest divine mystery as love: "This is my supreme word to you, the deepest secret: I love you intensely. You are extremely dear to me!" (18:64-65). The entire dialogue between the human seeker and the divine Master takes place as an articulation of divine love, as an expression of God's longing (*ishta*) for the humans. God's love awakens the drooping human spirit to new life and enables an integral commitment to society (*yajna*) with compassion (*karuna*).

Inner Freedom

It is often argued that the purpose of the Gita discourse was to motivate Arjuna to kill the Kauravas, the enemies. To a certain extent Gita has been misused to justify violence and caste domination. This, in my view, is the consequence of a distorted interpretation of the text. Whether the Bhagavad Gita is an integral part of the epic Mahabharatha is a disputed question. Mahabharatha, – for that matter any classical epic – is not a uniform book written by just one author. It took several centuries for compilation of this great epic (400 BC – 200 AD?). In the process of its composition several books of different literary genre have been interpolated into the corpus of the text. Hence this great epic serves as a mirror of the life and ethos of Indian society. This is the richness of the Mahabharatha. In order to grasp the spiritual depth of the Gita one needs to read it as an independent mystical poem.

Who is the real enemy in the Gita? Not so much the external enemy before us as the internal enemy within us: that is greed. The text unambiguously states this: "It is greed (*kama*), it is anger, all devouring and most sinful; know this to be the enemy here. This is the constant enemy of the man of wisdom. It is like insatiable fire within. It deludes the senses, the mind and the buddhi. Strike down this enemy so hard to get at!" (3:37-44). Gita describes how kama step by step destroys a person: "If one dwells on the objects of senses, attachment to them is born; from attachment greed is produced and greed leads to anger. From anger arises bewilderment, by which one loses touch with reality. With this one loses the sense of discernment and right perception (*buddhi*) and consequently one perishes totally" (2:62-63). This is a clear description of the psychological process taking place within a person under the grip of kama. With this the Gita offers a key to analyse

the malaise to today's consumerist culture. What dominates the contemporary ethos is possessiveness, not generosity, competition, not compassion. Gita describes how kama evolves into demonic forces in society like political oppression, economic exploitation, social discrimination and religious hegemony (16:13-19). All these are the real enemies which a person of equanimous vision would conquer.

The purpose of the Gita discourse is to empower a person for this spiritual warfare within oneself and within society. The basic requirement is inner freedom, ie. liberation from the sense of I-and-mine (*nirahamkarah, nirmamah*) To grow in freedom Gita proposes the three-fold path of spirituality: bhakti-jnana-karma. If we read the 18 chapters back and forth several times, we can find that there is a growth process described along this three-fold path. Let us locate three phases in this process: the initial phase, the assimilation phase and the integration phase.

The Initial Phase of Spiritual life

***Vijnana*: Textual Knowledge**

Every human person has two inner faculties of knowledge: the rational mind (*manah*) and the intuitive faculty (*buddhi*) (3.42). Mind objectifies everything that comes through the senses and analyses reality within the I-thou/it framework. What is acquired through this mental process is informative knowledge (*vijnana*). Buddhi intuitively enters into the core of reality and communicates experiential wisdom (*jnana*). What happens through the buddhi is the transformation of consciousness. In order to attain jnana the aspirant has first to acquire vijnana. Knowledge about spiritual matters is initially acquired through Scriptures and sages, sacred traditions and religious customs. The sadhaka should 'not forsake the ordinance of Scriptures' but carefully study them for 'they are the norms to determine what to do and what not' (16.23-24). He should also tread on the way of the spiritual masters who went ahead of him respecting the sacred traditions of religious life (13.25; 3.21). Above all he should seek the guidance of the enlightened masters through a 'reverential association' with them: 'those who see things as they are, will teach you wisdom' (4.34). With this insistence the Gita upholds that the spiritual life of individual persons

evolves within a wider process at the heart of the entire humanity. Through all these channels the revelation of the Divine as heard (*sruti*) by the sages is communicated to the sadhaka so that he is brought to the right path of spiritual process. Gita however calls those who 'merely take delight in the Vedic teaching' the 'unenlightened', because they go about 'giving vent to flowery words' without having the experience of the Divine (2.42). The genuine spiritual seeker has to go through the Scriptures, but grow beyond them towards the ever widening horizons of the Divine

Archana: Cultic Devotion

The spiritual aspirant needs a particular form of the divine Lord to fill his imagination and to motivate him to self-surrender. The human person needs a personal image of the divine Lord at the initial phase of spiritual life. The very structure of the human person as I calls for the experience of being loved by the divine thou. Hence he should approach the Lord through a symbol or form that appeals to him (7.21-22). Homage to the Lord is expressed at this stage chiefly through devotional offerings and cultic practices. What makes these offerings acceptable to the Lord is not so much the worth of the gift as the genuineness of self-giving (9.26) and the transparency of faith (7.21). The significance of cultic practices is that the divine Lord himself is the 'priest and victim' in all such operations (9.16,24; 4.24). Liturgical performances therefore help the sadhaka open himself to the saving presence of the Lord.

Though the Gita acknowledges the value of temple-centred cultic practices, it is also critical of the ritualistic aberrations and priestly manipulations of cult (2.42-44). True vision of the Lord is possible not through 'ascetical practices and ritual offerings' but only through bhakti that makes man 'know and see the Lord' and even enter into him' (11.53-54). This means that the sadhaka is called upon to deepen his bhakti by going beyond the rituals.

Niyatakarma: Sense of Duty

At the beginning of the spiritual journey the sadhaka has to be told how he should concretely respond to the demands of dharma in social life. His duties to society are therefore prescribed by social structures

and religious customs, manuals of ethics and persons in authority. Since the Gita was written in a caste-determined society, the caste-bound obligations were decisive in forming the conscience of the people with regard to their duties to society. Gita is also critical of the existing caste-structure and its ambiguous value systems. The role of the individual in society is to be determined not through birth into a particular caste (*jati*) but through the inborn quality of the person (*guna*). Everyone is born 'with some inherent qualities', which should determine his evolution in life and insertion into society. This would demand that everyone discovers the psychological and spiritual dynamics of his being and fulfils one's duty to society accordingly. (18.41-48). Then it would become clear that the fourfold caste structure though 'created by the Lord' is not actually created by him; it evolved rather 'according to the distribution of qualities and works' (*guna* and *karma*) which are conditioned by the individual's life, present and past (4.13). The role of a person in society has to be determined through a mature process of self-introspection (18.45). This self-discovery is a process that takes the individual beyond the roles dictated by caste or culture.

The Assimilation Phase of Spiritual Life

***Jnana* - Intuitive Perception**

At the initial stage the knowledge communicated through spiritual masters and Scriptures is acquired by the mind (*manah*), which is the analytical and rational faculty perception. Gradually a meditative process of interiorisation takes place and the spiritual insights acquired at the mental level are assimilated by the intuitive faculty (*buddhi*). The inner eye is enlightened from within and the sadhaka is enabled to "see the SELF in the self through the SELF", (6.20; 13.24; 2.55; 3.17). The 'light of wisdom shines forth in the buddhi' (10.11; 13.18) and the sadhaka is enabled to perceive 'the essence of reality' (13.12). This is a moment of inner illumination for it is an awakening to the 'light of lights hidden in the heart of everything' (13.17); it is the awareness of the personal self becoming totally transparent to the Divine SELF (7.17-19). Gita calls it *buddhiyogam*, union with the Lord felt in the buddhi. (10.10; 18.57; 2.39). It is ultimately a divine gift: "I give you a divine eye, now look at my divine form" (11.8, 10.10). *Jnana* is

extolled as the 'most powerful means of self-purification' and the sure way to ultimate liberation (4.36,39). „I consider the jnani to be my very Self.“ (7.18). Through jnana the sadhaka realizes that he is called to participate in divine life: *brahmabhuyaya* (18.53). With the eyes of the buddhi enlightened by the divine light one sees the Divine not only within oneself, but in the entire universe too. This is the scope for moving towards the phase of integration.

***Sraddha* - Total Self-surrender**

At the outset bhakti was determined by the temple outside with all its symbols and rituals related to a particular form of the Lord. As the contemplative introspection helps the sadhaka see the Divine in the temple of the heart, external ritualistic forms of bhakti evolve into an inner attitude of total surrender to the Lord.: "Let your mind dwell in me, let your buddhi enter into me; take refuge in me alone with all your being". (9.34; 12.8; 18.62, 65,66) This is a call for a free and total response of faith (*sraddha*) to the revelation of God's love (18.64-65; 12.20; 18.63) and grace (18.56, 58, 62). And here the Lord promises that the one who surrenders oneself to the Lord will "live in the Lord" (9.29, 12.8), "move in the Lord" (6.32) and finally "enter into the Lord" (9.34; 18.65,68, 2.54). This is an intense experience of the *unio mystica*. Bhakti as inner self-surrender to the Lord is the most universal religion for it is accessible to people of all castes and grades, even to the outcasts (9.30-32). Through the message of bhakti the Gita proclaims liberation to the downtrodden and hope for the oppressed; even the so-called sinners are justified through bhakti (9.30-32). "I will never let my devotee perish!" (9.31). The divine Lord whom one meets within the heart is also present in all things. Hence inner self-surrender leads to worshipping the Lord present in all things. This cosmic dimension of bhakti is the call to integration.

***Nishkama karma* - Work out of Inner Freedom**

As jnana and bhakti get interiorized, the dynamics of karma too gets refined. Though at the beginning the sense of duty was inculcated through external injunctions and social structures, now in the process of growth the sadhaka develops an inner freedom with which he fulfils his duties in society. This is ultimately freedom from *kama*, the

possessive attitude of the mind; hence Gita calls it *nishkama*, the negation of *kama*. It has two aspects: (a) freedom from the sense of the phenomenal ego-consciousness (*ahamkara*), which claims the ego to be the ultimate subject of all actions; (b) freedom from the passion of the ego to cling on to the fruits of actions as if the ego is the sole enjoyer of all the actions (*mamakara*). Hence *nishkama* is the attitude of freedom from the claim, *I do this for me* (12.13, 2.71).

This attitude is not something negative leading to inaction (6.1; 2.47; 3.8; 18.7). On the contrary it is a spiritual potential for a highly creative life of activity for it is the outcome of the *jnana* experience of oneness with the divine SELF (4.19, 33, 41; 3.30) and of the *bhakti* attitude of total self-surrender to the divine Lord. (3.30). With inner freedom the *sadhaka* surrenders all his actions to the Lord (12.6, 10; 18.57) looking at the Lord as the ultimate subject-and-object of his actions: "Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice or give away in alms, whatever penance you perform, offer it up to me: (9.27). Such actions then do not bind the *sadhaka* in the sense that he gets lost in the actions; an inner freedom and joy in the midst of intense activity would be the characteristic of his commitment (3.17; 6.21; 3.19). He works out of the experience that his whole being is rooted in the divine Ground of being (2.48). Such a rootedness in the Divine enables him to do the work with a sense of responsibility (*adhi kara*, 2.47) and equanimity (*samatvam*, 2.48), with integral consciousness (*buddhi yogam*, 2.49) and skilfulness (*kausalam*, 2.50). This is the positive aspect of what the Gita calls 'integral action' (*karmayoga*) and 'total renunciation' (*samnyasa*) (3.9; 6.1; 18.2). The divine Lord is the subject of the liberative activities in the world. Hence with inner freedom one commits oneself to the divine work in the world. This is the movement to the phase of integration.

The Integration Phase of Spiritual Life

***Samadarsana* - Holistic Vision of Reality**

Out of the intuitive experience of seeing the SELF in the self the *sadhaka* now looks at the world and "sees the same SELF abiding in all things, and all things in the SELF" (6.29). More specifically he "sees the divine Lord present in all things, and all things in the Lord" (6.30).

He can "taste and see" (7.8-12) the creative presence of God in every bit of reality around him and marvel at the universal theophany (*viswaroopa*, 11.15ff); the entire universe is now perceived as the 'body of the Lord' (11.13) and 'temple of the Lord' (13.2). Everything is permeated by God's presence (2.17; 15.17; 9.4) that pulsates at the "heart of all beings" (13.18; 15.15; 18.61). The sadhaka perceives in everything his own self too, in as much as he feels one with the divine SELF (*sarvabhutatma bhutatma*, 5.7). He sees the selfsame in everything (*samadarsana* 6.29). In such a holistic vision of reality one gets attuned to the divine rhythm of life, one grows into a cosmic consciousness.

***Samabhavana* - Feeling of Oneness with all**

When the whole universe is experienced as the 'temple of the Lord' bhakti too takes an extrovert and cosmic dimension. It is no more fixed solely on a particular symbolic form of the Lord in rituals or confined to inner self-surrender in meditation. Rather the sadhaka worships "the Lord present in all things" (6.31; 10.8; 9.13). Every bit of reality becomes sacred to him, for everything communicates to him the loving presence of the Lord. (10.20; 13.28; 15.17). Consequently he develops an attitude of loving concern for all beings: he can deal with them only with "friendliness and compassion without a taint of hatred" (12.13). He feels at home in the midst of all the vicissitudes of life for the entire world is the home of the Lord (13.3). He is "equanimous in pleasure and pain, profit and loss, victory and defeat, honour and disgrace" (2.3; 8.45; 6.7; 12.13; 18.19). His attitude to people too undergoes a transformation. As a liberated person he transcends the oppressive barriers of caste and 'sees the selfsame in the Brahmin and in the outcast, in the cow and in the dirty dog' (5.18). He views with equanimity 'friends and enemies and the neutrals as well' (6.9; 1.25). The sadhaka can with the grace of the Lord keep his head above the waters even when he finds himself in the midst of the acute struggles of life. He lives out of the conviction that 'whatever be his mode of life he always lives-and-moves in the Lord' (6.31). A genuine bhakta 'lives in the Lord and the Lord lives in him' (9.29). Life evolves in a divine milieu.

***Lokasamgraha* - Concern for the Integration of the World**

The God whom the Gita presents is a dynamic presence in the universe. With a holistic vision of reality the sadhaka perceives not only the universal immanence of the Divine but also the transforming power and presence of the Lord. The Lord is at work in the world leading everything to final liberation and integration. To this divine work of 'reinstating dharma' in all realms of life the sadhaka now surrenders all his activities. Thereby he gets a new motivation for doing the works. Gita calls it *lokasamgraha*: 'the enlightened' ones are motivated only by 'a passionate concern to bring about the welfare of the world'. (3.20,25) What is meant here is active commitment to the promotion of universal love and harmony, freedom and justice, for these are the values in the divine work of the building up a society based on dharma. With a passion (*rati*) for 'the welfare of all beings' (5.25, 12.4.) - not only of the humans - the sadhaka gets engaged in works of protecting the harmony of the environment. He realises that only a 'mutually nourishing relationship between the humans and the life-giving powers of nature' (*deva*) can bring about integral welfare for all. (3.11). 'Liberated from the shackles of kama' and 'rooted in the experience of jnana' he does his service to society and nature with an attitude of genuine 'self-sacrifice' (*yajna*, 4.23). Anything else would only 'enslave him to works' (3.9), nay, those who 'cook food only for themselves eat sin' (3.13). Social criticism flowing from God-experience cannot be more severe than this!

The Universal Appeal

These three phases do not necessarily come up one after the other. Rather these represent the three dimensions of an integrated spiritual process towards maturity and inner freedom. Every phase is somehow present always in the growth process of a person, whatever be his / her age or religion. The person, whose spiritual life thus evolves through the three-fold way of Jnana, bhakti and karma, becomes a liberated person. He experiences an inner freedom nourished by the integrated self-consciousness (*atmabodha*), and a dynamic freedom through a holistic vision of reality in relation to the world, (*dharmabodha*). He can look at the field of his life as the field of the evolution of dharma

(*dharmakshetra*). As a liberated person he can now 'stand firm' and proclaim: "Destroyed is my delusion; I stand firm. I will act according to Thy Word." (18:73).

Gita describes the evolution of spiritual life in terms of the threefold *marga*. The three elements, *jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma*, are inter-related in a complementary way. One or the other element may be found dominant in a person or at a particular stage of one's spiritual growth. However in the integrated growth process each element has a specific role. Each element takes the aspirant along a process of transformation. The truly integrated person, according to the Gita is a person who is at the same time a *jnani*, *bhakta* and *karmayogin*. Contemplative experience, devotional self-surrender and commitment to the welfare of the world blend in that person into an integrated spirituality.

I think, it is this integrative view on life that made the Bhagavad Gita so popular worldwide. Christians believing in Jesus the Christ or Muslims surrendering themselves to Allah can find in the Gita a spiritual process that takes them – along their own path of faith – to the experience of deep oneness with the Divine and genuine commitment to the world. Gita offers a good platform for genuine inter-religious encounters. Gita would not leave the aspirant at the initial phase of an I-thou relation with God, but would take him to a mystical experience in which the human I and the divine thou merge into ONE. Gita does not advocate an escapist spirituality, but motivates spiritual seekers to work intensely and passionately for the welfare of society and for the protection of environment. It is a book that teaches *contemplation in action* (*yogastah kuru karmani*, 2.48). No wonder it became a *vade mecum* for Mahatma Gandhi and a book of inspiration for many spiritual seekers and social activists today, beyond the barriers of religion and culture.

Sameeksha,

Kalady 683574

Documentation

Significant Statements on the Attitude of the Catholic Church towards other Religions

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65)

(The Ecumenical Council is the supreme authoritative body in the Catholic Church. The 20th Council in the history of the Church was the Second Vatican Council, which initiated a new epoch of a culture of dialogue with other religions)

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in the other religions. The Church looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings, which, though differing in many particulars from what it holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that TRUTH that enlightens all human persons. The Church therefore has this exhortation for its believers: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among them as well as the values in their society and culture

(Declaration on the Church's Relationship to other Religions, 1965 nr.3)

The Council declares that every human person has the right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all human persons are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such a way that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.

This right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person. This right to religious freedom is to be recognised in the constitutional law by which society is governed. Thus it is to become a civil right.

Human persons cannot exercise this freedom in a manner in keeping with human nature unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom.

TRUTH is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. This inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. In this process human persons explain to one another the Truth they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for TRUTH. Moreover, as the Truth is discovered, it is by personal assent that human persons adhere to it.

In all his activity a human person is bound to follow his conscience carefully, in order that he may come to God, for whom he is created. No one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to one's conscience.

(Declaration on Religious Freedom, 1965, nr. 2,3)

The Teachings of Pope Paul VI (1963-78)

(Pope Paul VI, who imbibed the spirit of openness at the IInd Vatican Council, motivated Catholics to meet sisters and brothers of other religion in respect and love. He visited India in 1964 and spoke well of the spiritual heritage of our country)

Yours is a land of ancient culture, the cradle of great religions, the home of a nation that has sought God with relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence, and in hymns of fervent prayer. Rarely has this longing for God been expressed as in the words written in your sacred books many centuries before Christ:

From the unreal lead me to the Real,

from darkness lead me to Light,

from death lead me to Immortality (Brih. Up. 1.3.28).

This is a prayer which belongs also to our time. Today more than ever it should rise from every human heart (Bombay, 03.12.1964).

We must come closer; we must come together with our hearts, in mutual understanding, esteem and love. We must meet as pilgrims set out to find God – not in buildings of stone but in human hearts. Thus we must work together to build a common future of the human race (Bombay, 03.12.1964).

The Teachings of Pope John Paul II (1978- 2004)

(Pope John Paul II gave a lot of impetus to dialogue initiatives in the Catholic Church. In 1986 he convened a Day of Prayer at Assisi with spiritual leaders of various religions including Hinduism. During his visits to other countries he always met believers of other religions and assured them of the Church's willingness for dialogue and collaboration)

Inter-religious dialogue at its deepest level is a dialogue of salvation, because it seeks to discover, clarify and understand better the signs of the age-long dialogue which God maintains with humanity (Rome, 13.11.1992).

By inter-religious dialogue we let God present in our midst, for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we open ourselves to God (Madras, 05.02.1986).

The interior and mysterious working of the divine Spirit is to be recognised in the great religious and sapiential traditions of East and West (*Veritatis Splendor*, 94).

We should have a great respect for everything that has been brought about in human persons by the divine Spirit who blows where he wills. The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a two-fold respect: respect for the human person in his / her quest for answers to the deepest question of life, and respect for the action of the divine Spirit in human persons (*Redemptoris Missio*, 29, 56).

Loyalty demands that we should recognise and respect the religious differences. We must respect each other, and we must also stimulate each other in good works on the path of God (Morocco, 19.08.1985).

The differences (among religions) are a less important element when confronted with the unity which is radical, fundamental and decisive (Rome, 22.12.1986).

Inter-religious collaboration must be concerned with the struggle to eliminate hunger, poverty, ignorance, persecution, discrimination and every form of enslavement of the human spirit. Religion is the mainspring of society's commitment to justice and inter-religious collaboration must reaffirm this practice (Delhi, 02.02. 1981).

Prayer is the bond which most effectively unites us. Through prayer believers of diverse religions meet one another at a level where inequalities, misunderstandings, bitterness and hostility are overcome before God (Message to the World Day of Peace, 08.12.1991).

God likes the developing history of humanity to be a fraternal journey in which we the believers of different religions accompany one another towards the transcendent goal which God sets for us. Either we walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others (Assisi, 27.10.1986).

The Letter addressed to Hindu friends inviting articles

Dear Friends,

“May we look at each other with the eyes of a friend”

(mitrasya chakshusha sameekshamahe, Yajur Veda, 36.18)

Jeevadhara is an international Catholic theological journal that is published from Kottayam, Kerala, six times in English and six times in Malayalam a year (www.jeevadhara.org). It reaches out to a good number of critical thinkers, theologians and social activists worldwide. *Jeevadhara* gives witness to the self-critical, world-affirming and dialogical patterns of thinking in the Church. A major thrust of the journal is to promote a culture of inter-religious harmony, and the September issue deals specifically with this theme.

In the September 2010 issue we would like to listen to what our Hindu sisters and brothers truly think of us Catholics. Genuine dialogue is possible only when the other has a chance to speak out from the heart, even if the thoughts are at times disturbing or challenging for the listener. As religious fundamentalism is becoming a menace on the religious landscape of India, we would like to know if our Hindu friends perceive Catholics contributing to it in this land of *dharmasamanvaya*.

I request you kindly to tell our readers sincerely what you as a Hindu think of us Catholics. I am giving a few questions as orientation points; however you need not take each and give an answer. Kindly keep in mind the concerns expressed in these questions when you write down your reflections.

1. What has been your acquaintance with Catholics?
2. What do you appreciate in the faith and life of Catholics?
3. What is your criticism of the claims and work of Catholics?
4. Do you think that Catholics provoke religious fundamentalism?
If yes, in what way?
5. How do you assess the dialogue initiatives of Catholics?
6. What would Hindus concretely expect from the life and service of Catholics in India?

Yours sincerely,

Fr. Dr. S. Painadath SJ
(Section Editor)

INDIA TODAY

A Study of its Socio-economic, Political and Religious Situation

Jose Thayil

Dr. Jose Thayil explores in this article the present Indian scenario, highlighting its socio-economic, political and religious aspects. He underscores the six important aspects of Indian society which need special attention: poverty, caste system, unemployment, migration, religious fundamentalism and terrorism, and politics. He challenges leaders as well as common people to take appropriate steps to eradicate these social evils, and invites the collaboration of all the people of good will in building a more humane and just nation.

Introduction

The history of India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization which flourished some 5000 years ago. India is known for its many natural resources. It has also many well developed languages. The Indian economy is growing steadily over the past few years. Exposure to mass media has increased drastically over the years. TV has become very common among the masses. According to census 2001, 64.3 per cent of the urban and 18.9 per cent of rural households now own TV sets. Mobile phones have become very common even among the daily wage earners. It has become a cheap and efficient

way to communicate with their friends and relatives, especially when they are working far away from their homes. With the widespread use of the electronic media even the illiterate people can get a lot of knowledge and information.

Though India has many things to boast about, it still has some dark areas which need attention. In this article I would like to concentrate on some of these areas and make some meaningful and relevant theological and scriptural reflections. To begin with India is known as a rich country with a large number of poor people. Our per capita income is going up year by year, but the wealth is getting concentrated in the hands of a few with the result that more than 30 per cent of our people are living under the poverty line.

Poverty is caused by various factors. I shall mention only a few important factors in this article. Government has initiated many programmes to reduce poverty. A distinct feature of the Indian society is the caste system. People are divided into high caste or low caste or outcaste. There is a lot of discrimination, oppression and injustice taking place in the name of caste. Hinduism supports the caste system, and the upper caste Hindus perpetuate this religious belief. People belonging to the lower castes have been fighting against this unjust practice and they have been able to bring about some changes in society.

Globalization and economic depression have aggravated the problem of unemployment all over the world and have affected India too. Many projects are capital intensive and try to manage with the minimum number of labourers. The economic growth of a nation depends on the distribution of wealth among its citizens. This can happen only when all the citizens are adequately employed. Large scale unemployment in some areas leads to large scale migration of people to other parts of the country in search of employment. In some cases these migrations cause conflicts between the migrants and the local people. The local people accuse the migrants of stealing their jobs. The employers are happy to hire the migrant labour because of their docility and unquestioning attitude.

Terrorism is one of the major curses of modern India. There are many disgruntled groups and they vent their anger by terrorist activities.

Many innocent people lose their life and property due to these inhuman activities which are often supported by fundamentalist religious groups. When individuals or groups are unjustly treated, they have a tendency to join some fundamentalist group to fight for their rights or to take revenge on the perpetrators of such injustice. Some terrorist groups are supported by politicians for their own vested interest.

Indian politics has undergone many changes in the recent past some of which are good while others are not so good. Vote-bank politics has become very common among politicians. As a result developmental activities are seldom taken up with a view to promoting the overall growth of the nation. One of the problems with coalition governments is that each of the coalition parties has to be placated, and in this process the national interest suffers.

1. Poverty

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. It has the advantage of a large labour force in the IT sector at relatively low costs. Because of this India is able to attract a lot of work from the developed countries which would otherwise have to spend a huge amount of money for the same amount of work.

Though India has made good economic progress, it is a shame that a large number of Indians live in abject poverty. India has the world's largest number of poor people living in a single country. Out of its total population of more than 1 billion, 350 to 400 million people are living below the poverty line. Nearly 75% of the poor people are in rural areas, most of whom are daily wagers, landless labourers or self-employed house-holders. The poverty reduction programmes of the government have helped to increase the number of the middle class very much, but the benefits of these programmes have not reached the poor people. The causes of poverty can be summarized as follows:

Unequal distribution of income: Some government and private employees get very high salaries while those in the unorganized sector have low incomes.

Unequal distribution of wealth: Though attempts were made for the distribution of land through land ceiling Act, it was never

implemented satisfactorily. Government projects were aimed at reducing poverty rather than making the poor the owners of wealth.

Overpopulation is another cause for poverty. When a family has many children, it is not able to meet the basic needs of all with the meagre earning of the parents.

Illiteracy makes the poor remain where they are. According to UNICEF "India Statistics" the adult literacy rate of India in 2007 is only 66%. Rural education rate will be much lower than 66%. The illiterates are not able to generate more income either through employment or other private enterprises.

The existence of caste system in India, especially in rural India, is a major cause of the continuation of poverty. Those who belong to the lower castes do not get equal opportunities to prosper in life.

The failure of Public Distribution System (PDS) is another reason for the present poverty. PDS started as a means of supplying the essential commodities like wheat, rice, sugar and kerosene at an affordable rate to the poor people. PDS comes under the responsibility of both the central and state governments. It is the responsibility of the central government to procure, store and transport the essential commodities. The operational responsibilities including allocation within the State, identification of families below poverty line, issue of ration cards, supervision and monitoring the functioning of FPSs (Fair Price Shops) rest with the State Governments.

Child labour also contributes to the poverty in India. On the one hand, poverty forces the poor parents to send their children to work in order to get additional income for the family. On the other, the existence of cheap labour in the form of child labour robs the adults of their labour opportunities. Child labour reduces the possibility of the adults to bargain for adequate family wages.

Poverty leads to unhygienic living conditions, high infant mortality rate, malnutrition, sickness, illiteracy, child labour, etc.

The government of India has initiated many poverty alleviation projects. Below are some of them.

- Small farmers' development programme.
- Drought area development programme.
- Minimum needs programme.
- National rural employment programme.
- Nehru Rozgar Yojna.
- Prime Minister Rozgar Yojna.
- Urban Basic services for the poor programme.
- National social assistance programme.

Many of these programmes were not successful since there was not sufficient coordination between the central and the state governments. Power politics come into play and the poor people are the losers in the process. A good amount of the fund meant for the poor goes back to the centre because of the lack of implementation by the state governments.

2. Caste System

One of the characteristic marks of the Indian society is the caste system. We find poverty in other parts of the world, but poverty combined with caste is found only in India. Religion plays an important role in preserving and perpetuating the caste system and untouchability. Indians are by and large religious minded. Many have protested against the caste system. One of them was Lord Buddha. Buddhism does not follow the caste system. As Buddhism was becoming increasingly popular among the lower castes, the Brahmins finally managed to expel Buddhism from India.

Although the Indian Constitution has banned the practice of untouchability, it continues still in many parts of India, especially in the rural areas, and rarely is anyone punished for it. One of the reasons for this is that most of the law enforcing officers come from the upper castes. Caste and class are interrelated. People belonging to the higher castes are generally rich and the people belonging to the lower castes are generally poor. Many factors are responsible for this. Due to poverty the lower caste people are not able to get higher education, and even if some manage to get good education, they do not have the right influence to get well-paid jobs. Those who belong to the higher castes

don't like to work under a person from lower castes. This was very clear in the case of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, who came from a lower caste and was appointed as an officer with higher caste people working under him. Even the peons refused to bring drinking water for him and his subordinates refused to eat with him.

Conversion to other religions that do not profess a caste system was a means adopted by people of lower castes to get out of their oppressive situation. Many of them became Muslims during the Mogul period, later some joined Sikhism, many got converted to Christianity during the British rule and many adopted Buddhism in 1956 under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. The main reason for conversion was not economic, but social and psychological. Conversion gave them a new sense of self-worth and dignity. According to Dr. Ambedkar, any religion worth its name should recognize the dignity and equality of everyone.

Conversion to Christianity gave them a chance to educate their children. If they moved out into the towns or cities where their background was unknown, converted Christians were not considered untouchables. A positive outcome of mass conversion was that the caste Hindus tried to improve the conditions of those belonging to the Scheduled caste in order to keep them within the Hindu fold. Many government programmes were initiated with a view to reducing oppression and injustice committed against them. Those who benefited most from these programmes were those of the Schedule castes who did not convert.

3. Unemployment

India is faced with the problem of large scale unemployment. One of the reasons for unemployment is the enormous growth in population. Every year about 5 million people become eligible for employment. Globalization also affects the Indian industries and many lose their jobs as a consequence. The computerization and automation also reduce the possibilities of employment. Strikes in industries cause losses for the industry, and sometimes they are forced to close down causing more unemployment. Our education system also is partly responsible for the growing unemployment. It does not prepare students for self-employment. The present system prepares them only for white collar

jobs. All the Five Year Plans laid emphasis on employment-generating schemes, but they did not bring about the desired results. "Recently the UPA Government has come up with Rural Employment Guarantee programme which aims to provide minimum days of employment to people living in the villages. This is a laudable programme if implemented sincerely because it will provide employment to people during natural calamities like drought, floods, etc."

We can classify unemployment mainly into two categories: voluntary unemployment and involuntary unemployment. Due to various factors many people remain unemployed or underemployed by their own choice. In the case of involuntary unemployment the person who is unemployed has no choice in the matter. Unemployment is thrust upon him or her. It means that the person is deprived or removed from remunerative work, although s/he is capable of working and willing to work.

3.1. Types of Unemployment

Forms and types of unemployment according to Hock are:

Cyclical unemployment – When the economy is strong, there will be more opportunities for employment, and when there is an economic depression, many employees will be laid off. So the employees have to wait for the economy to catch up again for their employment opportunities.

Sudden unemployment – When changes take place at a place where people are employed, many may lose their job. If a group of people have been employed for a particular job, they will be asked to leave after the work is completed.

Unemployment caused by failure of Industries – Disputes among the partners may lead to the closure of a factory or industry and the employees will be left jobless. Another reason could be that the products which they produce may have no market.

Unemployment caused by deterioration in Industry and business – Deterioration can take place in industries or business. This may be due to the mismanagement by the employers or due to market losses because of tough competition. In any case, the employees lose their jobs in the process.

Seasonal unemployment – Certain industries and traders engage workers for a particular season. When the season comes to an end, the employees will be unemployed. Sugar cane factories are known for seasonal employment.

With the emphasis on rural education “8 million children have been taken off the fields in the last decade to join the rural schooling system.” These children have high hopes of getting some kind of employment. One of the challenges facing the government is to create semi-skilled employment for these first generation literates. If the government fails in this, it is difficult to keep up their motivation for education.

3.2. Unemployment and Migration

Unemployment in the villages leads to large scale migration to the cities in search of jobs. In the cities people find some jobs or other. For the landless poor migration seems to be the only option left for survival. Many people migrate to the cities on a temporary basis. As long as jobs are available in their own villages, they prefer to remain there. Cities have many advantages over villages. Cities have facilities like good roads, electricity, telephone and internet connections, entertainment opportunities, etc. Government spends disproportionately more for developmental activities in the cities compared to the villages. Just as migration takes place from villages to the cities, there are also migrations taking place from poorer states to the richer states in India. People also migrate from one rural area to another rural area. “In Gujarat, rural-rural migration, especially from the drought-prone to the agro-climatically better-endowed districts, seems to have created overcrowding in the districts of destination.”

We can also see the phenomenon of circulatory migration. The employers prefer to hire migrant labour since they are comparatively cheaper and more docile than local labour. Thus the migrant labourers keep moving from place to place searching for jobs and better wages. Often there are middlemen between migrant labourers and employers. These middlemen advance a certain amount of money to the families of the labourers and hire them for work. Even when the working conditions are far from satisfactory, they are obliged to work because of the debt they have incurred. Migrant labourers do not enjoy many

rights, and as a result they are at the mercy of the employers. The employers following the capitalist principle tend to employ labour at the cheapest rate wherever it is available. Since migrant workers are not permanent they do not belong to any labour unions and live constantly in insecurity and the fear of losing their jobs.

Migrant labour has its own adverse effects on the families as well as on the whole nation. "All theories of migration concede that migration occurs when the region of origin lacks the opportunities which the destination promises." Manual labourers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were targeted during the recent attack on them by the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena workers. MNS chief, Raj Thackeray, encouraged violence on these manual labourers from outside Maharashtra in the name of protecting job opportunities for the sons-of-the-soil. "The alarming call of political parties to curb migration on ethnic lines is a by-product of the economic distress facing the nation." The supporters of the Telengana state want to create Telengana Navnirman Sena taking inspiration from Raj Thackeray.

In 2003 Assam witnessed large scale ethnic violence to curb outsiders from entering the state for competitive exams. "Fifty-six Biharis were murdered in Assam in November 2003, over a week of sustained ethnic violence. In the face of intense competition for the semi-skilled category of jobs (requiring a minimum of eighth standard education) in the Indian Railways (the single largest employer in the world), targeted bloodshed was the answer. A mere 2,750 vacancies in Assam had attracted 20,000 prospective applicants from Bihar. This prompted the local ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) to call for the protection of employment opportunities for the sons-of-the-soil, a long-standing ideology of Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena in Maharashtra. In the days of violence, 11 wage labourers were also brutally murdered because they hailed from Bihar." The real problem lies in 'jobless' growth. The reason for the jobless growth in economy is that economic progress is based on capital intensive projects.

Migration for jobs has its own positive aspects. It is a protest against the unjust wage system prevalent in their area. They refuse to be docile and comply with the unjust practices. It also helps those who

are staying back to have a greater bargaining power for better wages and other facilities.

4. Religious Fundamentalism and Terrorism

India was known for its tolerance of religious minorities over the centuries. Hinduism is known for its ideal of non-violence. What has happened to our tolerance and peaceful coexistence? Today religious fundamentalism seems to have taken an upper hand. Religious fundamentalism aims at triumphalism. Hindutva stands for Hindu nationalism. "Hindu fundamentalism is an offshoot of modern nationalism, which emerged in the Western Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century" It aims at a Hindu nation state. It wants to create an identity by inclusion and exclusion: It tries to include all those who have similar religious affiliations and exclude those who have a different religious tradition. Thus it tries to take the tribals and the outcasts into the Hindu fold. Hindutva tries to unite people by their hatred towards other religions, especially Islam and Christianity. It considers these two groups to be foreigners and anti-nationals. "Muslims and Christians are targeted as if they are the cause of all ills affecting Hindus." The agenda of Hindutva is to make India a Hindu nation. All non-Hindus must "merge themselves in the national race by adopting its culture and forsaking their separate identity; or they must remain subordinate to the Hindu culture, claiming nothing, demanding nothing, not even citizenship." The ultimate aim of Hindutva is to establish a theocratic rule in India following the model of some of the Islamic countries.

During the last two decades or so terrorism has become a very serious problem in India. Government alone will not be able to take care of this problem. Ordinary people need to cooperate with the government machinery to root out terrorism. No religion worth its name will encourage the ruthless killing of innocent people. Those who are involved in terrorist activities have no religion at all. Many terrorists claim to be fighting for a just cause. But the methods they use are very inhuman. End cannot justify the means.

Many people are afraid to help the government even if they have some knowledge about the terrorists or their plans. Often they are

targeted as accomplices of terrorists. They don't want to be suspected and watched over by the police. Unless this kind of attitude and treatment are changed, ordinary people will not come forward to help the police and the government officials to curb this menace.

Terrorist activities are often the result of unjust treatment meted out to one or the other minority group. Every fundamentalist group needs to be identified, and proper action needs to be taken, in order to make sure that they don't disturb the peace of the country. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 was the beginning of modern-day terrorism against the Muslims. The Hindu fundamentalists have to take responsibility for initiating terrorism in our country. "There is an unholy nexus between religion and politics whose main agenda is to batter secularism and democracy." A minority group cannot openly fight against the majority group. So they tend to use terrorism to show their displeasure and take revenge. The Muslim community in India feels that the Gujarat government led by Mr. Narendra Modi was a silent spectator to the massacre of innocent Muslims after the Godhra train tragedy. The affected parties in their frustration want to show their anger in whatever way they can.

There are many politicians who are openly promoting violence against minority communities in the name of language, culture and job opportunities. A backlash has to be expected by way of terrorist attacks in order to counteract the violence against them.

Many terrorist groups get young recruits from the families of the victims of riots and communal violence. Sometimes police randomly pick up a few from minority communities on false charges and then persecute or send them to jail. This only aggravates the problem of violence and terrorism. The members of the minority communities feel insecure and they tend to live close to each other and thus develop a ghetto mentality. Hence to fight against terrorism means to create an atmosphere of peace and justice. If injustice is perpetrated against any community, there can be no peace.

5. Politics

Many changes have taken place in Indian politics in the recent past. The phenomenon of coalition governments has come to stay.

There is an increasing participation of the Dalits and people from backward groups in government. Also there is an increase in female participation in politics. With the conscientization of the oppressed through the NGOs, more pressure is put on the government for accountability to the people. Mass media is playing an important role in exposing the corrupt officials and politicians including some ministers. With the policy of privatization, the government's hold over the economy has weakened. Multinational companies have greater influence on the national economy. The Indian voter has become more responsible in electing the right party and the right people by ignoring the vote-bank strategy. "The most remarkable achievement of parliamentary democracy in India is that it has survived so well in so apparently unpromising a social environment."

Being a large country India lacks homogeneity. People of India are divided among themselves on the basis of religion, language, caste and race. Politicians take advantage of this diversity and have started many political parties catering to the needs of these groups. They are keen to keep up these divisions in order to get votes and get elected to power. They play vote-bank politics and openly profess their support for a particular group. The vote-bank politics of many parties at the national and state level sidelines major issues such as economic welfare, national unity, national security, etc. Political parties take up economic issues in order to show that they are interested in the problems of the common people.

We notice that there is a criminal-politician nexus. Many politicians have criminal records, and that doesn't seem to affect them negatively in their political career. "In July 2008 Washington Times reported that nearly a fourth of the 540 Indian Parliament members faced criminal charges, including human trafficking, immigration rackets, embezzlement, rape and even murder."

Conclusion

With all its problems India survives as a single nation with a democratic character. India needs to find ways and means to come to grips with its many problems. Poverty has to be challenged so that the whole nation can move towards prosperity and progress. India has to

find more employment for its people by creating employment-generating schemes. Caste system is a shame and a curse on our country, and the national leaders need to take appropriate means to abolish this evil system.

Migration is a real problem in India. Due to various factors the landless labourers are migrating to other parts of the country. Our cities are getting overcrowded, and the number of slum dwellers keeps increasing day by day. Migrants live and work without any rights and are easy prey to exploitation by their employers.

Terrorism has to be tackled in an amicable manner. The grievances of the people whom terrorists represent have to be addressed from a humane point of view and a political solution has to be sought. Terrorism cannot be contained purely by the use of force. Religious leaders have to take an active part in correcting the distorted belief systems and practices of their respective religions.

All citizens need to take a more active part in politics. If politicians are irresponsible and corrupt, part of the blame has to be taken by the common people. Today there are many legal provisions whereby politicians can be made accountable to the people. Often people don't bother about them and, as a result, politicians misuse public money and engage in many criminal activities.

It is the need of the hour that we commit ourselves to making our country a better place to live in. It is necessary to collaborate with all the people of good will to eradicate the evils of poverty and corruption.

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Book Review

Felix Wilfred, *ASIAN PUBLIC THEOLOGY. Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2010, pp. xxvi + 336, Rs. 350

The book *Asian Public Theology* is the outcome of the genuine reflection of Felix Wilfred, which emerged through his authentic engagement with and concern for the lot of the neglected and repressed identities of the Asian continent. The word "Public" is the key notion of this book and it indicates certain common issues that affect the common man and woman in the continent of Asia. The book holds the subalterns' concerns as the basic platform for theological discussions. The concerns are: freedom from organized oppressive forces, emancipation from the tyranny of market that engulfs the life of the poor, freedom from exclusive notion of community life, and finally the flourishing of the nature, which is the material basis for human existence and life.

This public theology confers a motivation for the Christian community to connect itself with the affairs that affect the world. The issues that are discussed in this book are not oriented to a particular culture or a religion, but are addressed to the heterogenic realities that exist in the Asian space. It affirms heterogeneity because Asian communities are very much inter-religious and filled with the beauty of multiple identities.

The vital theme that connects all the discussions in this book is ethics. The author firmly believes that any issue that affects the human community, especially the subalterns, has to be dealt from an ethical perspective, because without such an outlook all our commitments and thinking, especially the theological reflections, would lack enough impetus to reach the world at large. Having this notion as the firm platform, he asserts that all the religions have to play an ethical role in the realm of public life. This leads us him to state that all the religions should deconstruct themselves and become a performative force rather than function within pre-determined structures. According to the author,

this performative act of the religions in the realm of public life is an ethical journey that never ends.

From the start to the finish the author points out the emotions and feelings, the pain and pathos of the oppressed identities. It is a central concern to the journey to which the book invites us. His conception of Asian public theology tells us that the key issue that deteriorates the harmony of the Asian continent is the sense of exclusion: that is the negation of the repressed "Other" from the space of life. Exclusion becomes the breeding ground for corruption, poverty, competition and disregard for the dignity and rights of others different from one's group.

The author proposes that this sense of exclusion be replaced by the spirit of inclusion. Public Theology advocates the promotion of an inclusive approach that would allow the little narratives of the oppressed to grow and blossom in ever new spaces. These have the potential to take on the grand narratives. It is through such experiences, according to the author, we have the authentication of God's presence. In other words, it is through the trace of the *multiple-other* that we could find the face of God in the contemporary human history.

The closed hegemonic and hierarchical systems such as casteism, classism and neo-colonialism which operate within the Asian societies impede the growth of the nations and lead them to despair and failure. The contemporary spiritual gurus, pundits and politicians who foster these demonic structures in the name of religion, knowledge and progress have to be challenged in order to secure the future of the nation and the subaltern peoples.

The author suggests that to confront such mammon and its muscle power we have to have an ethical auditing, which confers authenticity to the positive steps that are taken to save the poor and the oppressed. In fact such disposition to actualize a culture of transparency and accountability in the public sphere would bring in a just and equitable society to the fore. Ethical auditing includes all religious establishments (including Church) and social and political structures. The public theology tells us that such auditing could provide an atmosphere in which the poor get their due; the body of a woman becomes a source of life and power; misinterpreted anthropological approach will be exposed; and

the practice of dharma will be adopted as the key source of good governance. In short, such a commitment towards the neglected will bring forth the nuances of the Reign of God that was envisaged by Jesus and by Sangha of Buddhism.

When the author speaks about the commitment of the Church, he affirms the need for it to revisit the prophetic mission of its guru in order to actualize the thrust of the Kingdom values here and now. It has to inculcate the meaning of the social teachings of Jesus to the believing communities. There is need for a de-absolutization of every power. It is this approach that will confer moral credibility to the Church and help it to break loose of aggressive and homogenous structures. In fact, such breaking will herald the dawn of true democracy. Realization of true democracy is also an important duty of the Church today and part and parcel of its spiritual journey.

Another prime item that emerges from this book is that there is no Asian Public Theology without addressing the issue of economy. It is so essential because of the increasing inequality in the Asian societies due to the dominance of the private sector that controls Indian and Asian economies. The unjust situation that prevails in the Indian and Asian societies is very much linked with the destruction of eco-system. According to the author, the common good of a society or a nation is connected with the good of the earth and the human community, because both are inseparable. In other words, it is an ecological relationship. Hence realization of an eco-justice is nothing but the actualization of an egalitarian society. If we articulate this notion in the words of Felix Wilfred, "The defense of the earth and its eco-system is the defense of the poor, which implies the protection of the environment."

Finally, as the evil powers control the world everywhere and at all levels the public theology invites all the Asian thinkers, social activists and religions to take up a joint venture to promote an effective dialogue among the communities, cultures and religions that exist in Asia. According to the author with its rich ethical resources that emerge from the teachings of its guru Jesus, Christianity can function as a force to create the whole of humanity into one single family as the children of God. -It is through this realization that we could envisage a

society in which diversity and plurality gain their prominence, the spirit of co-existence becomes an imperative force and the sense of openness and flexibility serve as the medium to resolve conflicts. For this to happen, a good theological education for the public life to the believers is very much essential. The author believes that such education could cultivate the minds of the believers to commit them towards a praxis oriented life, which leads those towards the space in which the mysteries of the divine unfold. To actualize this we have to listen to the rhythm of life that exists in nature. The liberating Spirit of the Divine resides in the feeble voices of the unknown-multiple identities existing all around us. What we have to do is just listen.

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